

Adventures of the Spirit

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The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing,
Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary
Women Writers



Edited by
Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis



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INTRODUCTION



PHYLLIS STERNBERG PERRAKIS

Carolyn Heilbrun, lamenting the lack of opportunities for older women to find “something new, something not yet found” in their lives, comments that “if we could discover a word that meant ‘adventure’ and did not mean ‘romance,’ we in our late decades would be able to free ourselves from the compulsion always to connect yearning and sex. . . . The reason for the predominance of sexual aspiration, I have decided, is that no other adventure has quite the symbolic force, not to mention the force of the entire culture, behind it” (103). Contrary to Heilbrun’s assumption, this volume suggests that Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and other contemporary women writers illuminate a new kind of midlife and older woman’s adventure, one that is spiritual in nature, enabling new ways of being and becoming, but open-ended and capable of great variation in practice. These journeys of the spirit do not leave behind the body; indeed, they are often posited on the variations in the body as it ages and decays, forcing the protagonists to confront the slippage between what they can imagine of, and for, themselves and their painful reality.

Very often the contemplation of physical and/or mental loss sets in motion a retrospective movement—a long look back as the woman of a certain age tries to assess where she has come from, assimilate the twists and turns along the way, and decipher a shape or pattern to the journey. At times the process of seeking this pattern precipitates a breakthrough to a new, more capacious sense of self, an acceptance of modes of self-knowing or being not possible earlier. Sometimes the process of reassessment is slow and thoughtful; at other times it is

quicken, propelled by a traumatic experience or a sudden loss that heightens the awareness and shatters old psychic barriers. These inner journeys occur at different levels of development and reach different stages of self-awareness, revealing not only the challenges and difficulties of the older years for women but also the unique opportunities that such challenges provide to acquire a new perspective on one's self and one's life—to find (or make) a place or space, a vantage point, from which to view one's past, one's sense of self, even the workings of one's mind.

My understanding of spirit and of the formulation of this space of detachment comes in part from the work of Ken Wilber,¹ a theoretician of consciousness. Integrating and extending the various maps of self-development of many thinkers, including Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, and Carol Gilligan, Wilber has formulated a comprehensive theory of both individual and collective, subjective and objective evolution.² Dividing all of evolutionary development into nine nested spheres or waves of developing consciousness along the river of life from matter to spirit, Wilber posits nine stages of expanding individual development, each of which consists of a different worldview experienced by the self inhabiting or identifying with that stage. These stages begin in infancy and continue over an individual's entire life. However, they are not rigidly separated from one another, and individuals do not necessarily pass through all the stages.

The first six basic stages of the evolution of consciousness, some form of which is common to almost all developmental schemes, begin with infancy and continue over an individual's whole life. The first three are associated with the "archaic" ("hatching of the physical self"), "magical" ("birth of the emotional self"), and "mythical" ("birth of the conceptual self") worldviews of the infant, toddler, and young child (Wilber, *Brief History* 147–53). While these stages are not as relevant to this study as the worldviews of later domains of self-identity, we do see aspects of the mythic worldview in the tribal identity of the aboriginal woman discussed by Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez in chapter 10. The next three stages—the rule/role, conventional self (concerned with social scripts); the worldcentric, postconventional self (able to judge and think for oneself); and the centaur, integrating self (able to integrate body and mind)—are the major focus of this study. It is not uncommon in the fictional characters discussed, as in life, to find individuals remaining at the fourth or fifth stage of spiritual development. They may possess a self-identity that requires conformity and is highly

conventional, adhering to the social scripts of their family or group (fourth stage). For example, Iris Chase in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* struggles to deal with family scripts decreeing that she act like a "lady" and sacrifice herself for her family, as Earl Ingersoll explains in chapter 4. Or an individual may reach stage five, where she can think for herself and formulate her own moral standards. The fruits of this stage free women to begin to question cultural scripts about aging. Many of the characters in this study are engaged in this enterprise, but none experiences it more self-consciously or painfully than Sarah Durham in Doris Lessing's *love, again*. Obsessively scrutinizing her awakening to erotic desire, she watches, like an attendee at a play, her fevered response to a young actor with whom she is erotically preoccupied, and she surveys her troubled dreams, which connect present chaotic emotions with past, even infant needs. But Sarah's particularly troubled retrospective journey ultimately frees her to accept the next stage on her spiritual journey, the detachment that leads to the integration of the mind and the body (see Virginia Tiger's discussion in chapter 1 of Sarah's obsessional state).

Wilber's sixth stage, which captures the new integrating potential of the self, is particularly interesting for this volume. Able to hold together the body and mind in one integrated awareness, the self for the first time is no longer purely ego-based, hence Wilber's characterization of this stage as the "centaur" self. Here the observing self can stand apart from the mind and observe it as an object (*Brief History* 174). We watch the survivor in Lessing's fictional memoir begin at this stage, capable of surveying both her present thoughts and her past behavior. Her self-conscious observation of her mind and feelings is imaged in part through her watching various avatars of her younger self, brought to life via the stages that her ward, Emily, rapidly passes through, while her ability to conjure up buried, unconscious feeling is captured by "looking through" the wall of her apartment (see chapter 2). The survivor's growing ability to accept both past selves and past evolutionary stages of civilization brings to the fore the profound new acceptance of self and others that can characterize this stage. Wilber calls it a break through—an ability "for the first time" to "*vividly grasp the entire spectrum of interior development*" (Wilber, *Integral Psychology* 51, emphasis in original).³ Here the observing self no longer thinks that the stage it has reached is superior to all the others. Rather, it is capable of appreciating the value and need for all the various stages of self-development. This profound new acceptance, of self

and others, helps elucidate the sense of inclusiveness that characterizes many of the women adventurers examined in the present volume. It enriches Sharon Wilson's discussion of the mythic figure of Medusa in chapter 3, the symbol of the older woman's acceptance of formerly frightening or monstrous aspects of herself, which she now embraces as the source of her creativity and strength. We see an example of this new acceptance in that other mythic voyager, the narrator in Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House*, who voyages deep within to discover the autonomy to continue to create in her later years, as Kathryn Van-Spanckeren explains in chapter 6.

Furthermore, a desire for inclusiveness, an understanding that "each level . . . is crucially important for the health of the overall spiral" (Wilber, *Integral Psychology* 51), has helped guide my choice of the diverse kinds of introspective women's journeys at various stages on the developmental spiral that compose this volume. The appreciation of inclusiveness helps us honor the way in which the aboriginal woman discussed by Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez in chapter 10 embraces her ancestors and her culture while integrating a new spiritual tradition into her life. Here we encounter a woman dwelling within the mythic consciousness of Wilber's third stage of spiritual development. Rather than seeing her development only in individualistic terms, Angela Sidney experiences her life course in terms of the stories and myths of her tribe. It is in the context of her storytelling that we most fully appreciate Sidney's ability to integrate the different worlds of her mythic and shamanistic tradition with her historical experience and her embrace of first Anglicanism and later the Bahá'í Faith.

An attempt to honor the diversity of women's spiritual struggles also guided my inclusion of essays that examine the unique structural shapes of the retrospective journeys of older women whose lives have been damaged by physical and sexual abuse. It is not the disturbed mother but her abused early midlife daughter who makes the retrospective journey that allows her to accept both her mother and herself in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, as Sandra Singer explains in chapter 9. An even more problematic self-acceptance is achieved by elderly, seemingly demented Mala Ramchandin with the help of Tyler, her nurse and coadventurer in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Jeanie Warnock, in chapter 11, explores the way in which Mala Ramchandin finds an image of healing and wholeness in the mirror of her nurse Tyler's love and, further, how Tyler mirrors back wholeness to Mala through his cocreation with her of her life narrative.

What is particularly interesting for my purposes about Wilber's formulation of stages of self-evolution is that he extends them to include transpersonal, postconventional realms, and he connects these spiritual domains to the earlier modes of self-knowing and self-being.⁴ These transpersonal domains extend self-identity to embrace all the cosmos and, beyond that, the realm of the divine. Wilber's connection of these more mystical, transpersonal realms to the earlier, more psyche-bound domains of self-identity allows us to understand the wide variety of searches and journeys undertaken by the various protagonists and heroines that this volume examines as all part of one evolving movement of consciousness from matter toward spirit, at whatever stage or phase individuals find themselves. An acknowledgment of the transpersonal throws light on the mystic experiences of Doris Lessing's midlife protagonist in *Memoirs of a Survivor* who becomes capable of seeing the phenomenal world irradiated by the face of God. Further, it gives insight into both the spiritual journey of Lessing's timeless male/female retrospective narrator, Johor, in the first part of *Shikasta* and into the more limited retrospective diary of teenaged Rachel in the second half. Finally, it allows us to understand Lessing's own spiritual coming of age in *Shikasta*, where she portrays not only her own development but also that of all of humankind as a journey along a spiritual spiral (see chapter 2).

My choice of envisioning the spiritual development of the midlife and older woman in this volume as a dynamic spiral of consciousness—a movement back that facilitates the move forward, a revisiting of the past enriched by the perspective of the present that leads to a transformative future—is drawn in part from one particular map of consciousness that Wilber presents, the work of spiral dynamics developed by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, based on the work of Clare Graves. Providing the striking image of individual and cultural growth as the movement along a developmental spiral, Beck and Cowan posit that at each stage of growth individuals and societies revisit earlier concerns and understandings from a more mature perspective, so that each self-world “transcends and includes its predecessors” (Wilber, *Integral Psychology* 47). Furthermore, Beck explains that “the Spiral is messy, not symmetrical, with multiple admixtures rather than pure types” (qtd. in *ibid.* 48). Thus the evolving individual does not leave behind earlier phases of growth; rather, these continue to be available as resources the individual can draw on and revisit. In addition, different aspects of an individual's makeup (identity, needs,

moral stance) may develop at different rates and be at different levels on the spiral.

These insights help us better understand the complex nature of the retrospective journeys undertaken by various characters in the works examined in this volume. The look back by a more developed self to earlier modes of being and understanding allows the various female characters in this volume to pick up the “dropped threads” of self that were stranded at earlier levels of development.⁵ Sometimes the maturing self carries forward earlier modes of feeling or thinking contained within rigid frames of obsession or neurosis that prevent further development. The look back by more developed aspects of the psyche can heal or free these damaged or imprisoned parts of the psyche and include them in the more developed self’s ongoing growth. Debrah Raschke and Sarah Appleton show how each of Atwood’s three protagonists in *The Robber Bride* revisits earlier modes of feeling and behaving that were the traps set by previously undeveloped or stagnant aspects of self (see chapter 5). More controversially, Sharon Wilson argues that Iris Chase in Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* learns to pick up her dropped hand (“lying unmissed in Laura’s photograph”)—the symbol of “her ability to express feelings openly”—and tell her story (see chapter 3).

The complex structures of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* are both built around the special difficulties of picking up the dropped threads of a childhood truncated by physical and sexual abuse. In the case of Sidda Walker of *Divine Secrets*, Sandra Singer shows how the novel’s structure imitates the shifts in time and the activation of different levels of self that Sidda experiences as she peruses the Ya-Ya Sisters’ scrapbook, which captures disturbing, not fully understood childhood memories (see chapter 9). For octogenarian Mala Ramchandin, the dropped threads of lost aspects of the self are much more extreme. A victim of childhood incest, Mala has dropped not only access to her inner world but also the ability to relate to the outer world, as Jeanie Warnock explains in chapter 11. At the beginning of *Cereus*, the terrified old woman has spent almost all her adult life totally withdrawn from the human community, lost to language itself, and caught “in the endless repetition of the moment when she was left alone to face her father’s violent rage” (see chapter 11).

Wilber’s developmental schema provides the guiding images for most of the chapters in this study, although only chapter 2 explicitly

uses his work. The powerful structural image of retrospective spiritual development provided by Wilber, applied to the culturally and individually diverse range of midlife and older women's life journeys examined in this collection, yields richly meaningful results. Responding to the unique challenges of the individual retrospective narratives they examine, the various articles throw light on some of the most interesting theories of aging. For example, a number of the essays in this volume interrogate in some manner the trope of the older woman looking into a mirror. Aging studies theorist Kathleen Woodward has compared this search for identity with that of the infant in the Lacanian mirror stage, as Roberta Rubenstein elucidates in chapter 7. Woodward explains that whereas the infant, according to Lacan, discovers a physical unity in the mirror that belies his or her psychic disorientation, for the older person the mirror often plays the opposite role, revealing an inner unity that belies their physical deterioration (Woodward, "Mirror" 68).

Several essays explore varied ways in which the mirror makes visible not just the continuity with an established self but also the image of a self in gestation, a new self that is coming into being. This new self neither denies the previous reality of the midlife or older woman nor is limited to that reality but instead includes the previous "I" in the more holistic self that is emerging. Thus, as in Wilber's theoretical model, the evolving self found in the mirror image of older women protagonists in a number of essays transcends but includes earlier senses of self. Rubenstein explicitly interrogates the changing meanings of self implied in the numerous mirror-gazing occasions that occupy Fay Weldon's protagonist in *Rhode Island Blues*, tracing Felicity's development through the changing nature of her reflections. Rubenstein captures the evolution in Felicity's self-identity whereby she integrates her past and present, developing a deeper sense of what Wilber calls the centaur self.

For the three midlife women discussed by Virginia Tiger in chapter 1, mirrors are sources of self-knowledge and "the reclamation of psychic regions." Sarah Durham in *love, again* by Doris Lessing, surveying herself in the mirror at both the beginning and then the end of her year of erotic obsession, finds in her changed image the means for evaluating the cost of her painfully acquired self-knowledge. Avey Johnson, the protagonist of *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall, by comparison, does not recognize the elegantly dressed stranger when her gaze falls upon her mirrored image at the beginning of her inward and outward journey. She must voyage into her personal and ancestral

past to find the cultural reflection of the self not shown in the gilded cruise-ship mirror, while Candida Wilton in Margaret Drabble's *The Seven Sisters* must look into the mirror of the *Aeneid* to find her way home to a self willing to fully engage in life as she grows older. Tiger ends her exploration of these three heroines' encounters with mirrors that reflect their spiritual journeys with a poem by a contemporary American poet named Kathryn Levy called "The Middle Way," which directly addresses the problematic nature of the mirror sighting for the woman entering midlife. Gazing into the mirror, the narrator sees

. . . nothing
but death stared back—the worst
kind of death

the kind that goes on
and on

I think most, if not all, the contributors to this volume will agree that the cultural script that has made this vision so painfully familiar for many women is now being rewritten by the works and characters examined in this volume. If Rubenstein and Tiger directly address the nature of the mirrored gaze in their essays, the mirror is implicitly figured in a number of other essays. In my chapter I extend mirroring to the transpersonal realm, exploring how the luminous face in *Memoirs* achieves in the transpersonal domain what the mother's face provides for the psychic development of the infant in the first stage of life. D. W. Winnicott argues that the mother's face provides the first mirror for the infant, reflecting back the baby's behavior and helping the infant achieve a sense of autonomy and trust in the environment (111). The luminous face, in contrast, reflects not the survivor's outer behavior but her innermost spiritual being, a potential that she slowly moves toward acknowledging, until by the end of her memoirs, she is able to not only encounter the luminous center of self but also see the reflection of the divine face illuminating all aspects of reality (chapter 2). Again, the evolution in the mirrored image reveals the trajectory of developing self-identity proposed by Wilber. In this case the Survivor reaches the second of the three transpersonal stages mapped by Wilber, the "subtle" or "deity mysticism" phase of the transpersonal (191).

Mirrors can prevent as well as assist new self-creation, as Raschke and Appleton argue not only in relation to Zenia's "bad girl" mirror-

ings in *The Robber Bride* but also in the role that Laura, Iris's "good" sister, plays in *The Blind Assassin*, her confusing goodness increasing Iris's ambivalence and limiting the emergence of her new self-understanding (chapter 5). Ingersoll, as well as Raschke and Appleton, remark on the special mirroring of the writer's desires that occurs at the end of *The Blind Assassin*. Ingersoll notes that the nearness of death gives special poignancy to Iris's final dream—that her memoir may be read by her granddaughter. Thus the aged writer Iris holds up to us the writer's longing for a reader, even if only one, to attain what Ingersoll tellingly calls "the 'atonement' of art." Perhaps Iris's final longing is also a mirror for Atwood's own concern and that of many of the women writers examined in this volume for a reader able to respond to their protagonists' emerging selves.

The retrospective journey explored in this study in which a female character is led by inner or outer forces to examine earlier episodes and aspects of her life bears much in common with what geriatric specialist Robert N. Butler, "who coined the term ageism" (Waxman, *Hearth to the Open Road* 30), has called a "life review." He theorizes that it is "a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (Butler 66). Butler connects this process to "the realization of approaching dissolution and death" and believes that normally the "revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated" (*ibid.*). Butler goes on to state that "in the course of the life review . . . hidden themes of great vintage may emerge, changing the quality of a lifelong relationship. Revelations of the past may forge a new intimacy, render a deceit honest; they may sever peculiar bonds and free tongues" (*ibid.* 75). Butler's "life review" seems to be a particular instance of the dynamic of retrospective growth theorized about by Wilber and discussed above—impelled by the approaching end to consciousness, the self is often motivated to pick up the lost threads of unfinished psychic business or climb to a higher vista of self-identity by which to survey the past. Butler's account of the effects of the life review almost perfectly describes the dramatic revelations that emerge from Mala Ramchandin's assisted life review in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (see chapter 11) and from Iris Chase's complex retrospective account of her involvement in her sister's death in *The Blind Assassin* (see chapters 3, 4, and 5).

While Butler connects the life review to an awareness of approaching death, it can, in fact, happen at almost any time of life after the

self has developed enough to have an earlier stage to look back on, as age theorist Margaret Gullette points out in *Aged by Culture* (149). However, as the following essays will demonstrate, it is beginning in midlife that the pattern of women's retrospective spiritual journeying most powerfully manifests itself. The midlife need to investigate life's meaning and purpose has been remarked on by a number of theorists of human development, beginning with Carl Jung.⁶ As one Jungian theorist writes, at midlife a "crisis threatens . . . [that] is at bottom a spiritual crisis, the challenge to seek and to discover the meaning of life" (Hart 99).

The search for meaning and wholeness at midlife is a human need, but women's midlife spiritual adventures seem to follow a unique trajectory. Psychiatrist David Gutmann, who specializes in studying men and women in later life, characterizes postmenopausal women as achieving an "inner liberation" that manifests itself in new empowerment, autonomy, and willingness to take psychic risks (133–34). This female midlife renaissance may be due in part to increased concentration of testosterone in their blood (*ibid.* 181–82), as well as to the lessening of responsibilities in the home.⁷ Furthermore, Gutmann notes that the "rebirth" of the "postparental" woman may be preceded "by a period of extreme malaise" in early middle age (156, 157). In recent years, this midlife female trajectory has been portrayed by women writers with particular clarity and force, and half the essays in this volume explore the rich opportunities for women's spiritual adventuring of the new midlife narratives. These developmental stories of women of a certain age often begin with the woman at midlife experiencing a depression, unexplained malaise, or the falling apart of her world (see examples of this pattern in chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 9) as she must face the loss of a familiar stage of self-identity and encounter the fear and uncertainty that accompany the venture into unknown territory. Further, she must defy still-powerful cultural scripts that celebrate youth, beauty, and romance as the markers of women's happiness (the triad whose loss is acknowledged with agonizing pain by the poem with which Tiger ends her essay). However, midlife and beyond narratives of spiritual becoming need not deny the body. The midlife or older woman need not become sexually "invisible," as Kathleen Woodward notes in the introduction to *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (xiv). Erotic desire, still a problematic dimension of aging, is considered by Rubenstein one of the last frontiers of feminism (see "Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age"), and her essay in this

collection on the fairy tale–like romance of the octogenarian protagonist in Fay Weldon’s *Rhode Island Blues* encourages our appreciation of an alternative to the usual cultural scripts on aging (see chapter 7).

In general, the conception of spiritual adventuring celebrated in this volume honors what Wilber calls the immanent and the transcendent dimensions of spirit—its embrace of the natural world, relationships, community, and sensual fulfillment, as well as its aspirations for eternal existence and closeness to the divine.⁸ While Wilber notes that these conceptions of spirit are tied together in Plato, the West has traditionally acknowledged the ascending motif of movement from “the Many to the One . . . the Absolute . . . [the] Good,” while ignoring Plato’s equal emphasis on the descending movement of spirit, whereby “the One empties itself into all creation . . . [so] the entire manifest world [is] seen as the . . . embodiment of the Good . . . and to be celebrated as such! The greater the diversity in the world, the greater the spiritual Glory and Goodness” (*Brief History* 227–28). The spirituality celebrated in works discussed in this collection embraces both other-worldly ascent of the spirit (see especially chapters 1, 2, and 3) and this-worldly descent (found in a number of chapters). Both need to be acknowledged and integrated to show the richness and breadth of the river of spirit as it flows through human life.

Barbara Waxman’s study *To Live in the Center of the Moment: Literary Autobiographies of Aging* helps us find the relationship between the immanent and the transcendent figured in unexpected places. For example, in Audre Lorde’s autobiography Waxman discovers the desire to live intensely, to make the most of the moment, as a way to ward off fears of death and deepen and stretch the experience of the present (109). This desire may also be tied to powerful experiences of immanence in the embrace of the natural world or the celebration of the joys of work and love.⁹ These themes reappear in the present collection. We see a breadth of styles and modes of intense living portrayed in the chapters that follow, from the zany attempt by the three protagonists of Suzette Mayr’s *The Widows* to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel (chapter 8) to Yukon Native Angela Sidney’s poignant desire to “live [her] life like a story” (chapter 10).

In Florida Scott-Maxwell’s autobiography Waxman finds the desire for intense daily living characterized as the ascent of the self to “a new dimension of spiritual clarity” (*Center of the Moment* 170) that, in turn, must be balanced with the descending need of the aging body to submit to “natural limits” (Scott-Maxwell qtd. in *ibid.* 171). Several

chapters in this present collection deal with midlife and older women struggling to find this balance, sometimes in unlikely ways. Rubenstein explores one of the most “delicately realized” attempts in the efforts of eighty-three-year-old Felicity Moore of *Rhode Island Blues* to balance late-life love, and its accompanying revelations, with the limitations of her sagging octogenarian body (see chapter 7).

The essays in this volume cover works written by women writers in the last three decades. The earliest work, Doris Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor*, was published in 1974 when Lessing herself was fifty-five. Interestingly enough, Margaret Gullette (writing in 1988) identifies 1975 as the year when culture “was giving its writers permission to overthrow the traditional decline view that the middle years are a time of devolution” (*Safe* xiii). While Gullette’s study reminds us of the powerful effect of culture on the writer’s vision, Gullette herself notes that great writers were creating midlife stories of progress before the mid-1970s. I might add that Lessing, in particular, has more often anticipated and shaped new cultural trends than been influenced by them. We saw this in the 1960s with her feminist classic *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which helped awaken a generation of women readers to the sound of adult women talking seriously about life, love, and politics. Her more recent writing on midlife and older women’s retrospective spiritual journeys continues to challenge contemporary attitudes, especially those concerning aging and spirituality.

As we have already seen with reference to studies by Butler, Gutmann, Gullette, Rubenstein, Waxman, and Woodward, the new narratives of midlife and older women’s “journey to age”¹⁰ have generated new critical responses by age theorists, psychologists, and literary critics; the present volume enters into a dialogue with earlier critical work. Several studies have defined new genres or mapped out new areas of interest that this present volume complements or supplements. In *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* (1990), Barbara Waxman defines “the *Reifungsroman*, or novel of ripening,” a genre of female fiction that “rejects negative cultural stereotypes of the old woman and aging, seeking to change the society that created these stereotypes” (2). Of particular interest to the present volume is Waxman’s description of the “internal journey[s made by some protagonists] to their past through dreams and frequent flashbacks [as] essential features of the *Reifungsroman*” (17). The present volume develops this area in great depth.

Also highly relevant to this volume are the essays exploring the creativity of the older writer and supplying new models of later-life

fiction found in *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993), edited by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen. Foregrounding the unique expressions of creativity of the older writer, Wyatt-Brown and Rossen's collection adds to our appreciation of the new models of self-imagining in the present volume. In particular, Constance Rooke's essay defining the *Vollendungsroman*, "the novel of old age," offers another helpful generic model ("Cheever's Swan Song" 207). Besides defining the domain of the "universal" (the domain following death and preceding birth) as of special concern for the old writer, Rooke also provides insight into the potency of the last work and even the last pages written by the writer approaching death. These concerns throw light on the last pages that Iris Chase writes in her memoir in *The Blind Assassin*, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5 in this collection. Rooke's insights into the universal domain are also interesting in regard to the cosmology of *Shikasta*, as discussed in chapter 2.

The last two chapters of Christine Sizemore's study *Negotiating Identities in Women's Lives: English Postcolonial and Contemporary British Novels* (2002), which look at identity formation in women of middle age and later, are also helpful to this collection.¹¹ Sizemore examines women novelists from different locations who tell stories that reveal the "hybrid spaces between cultures where multicultural differences can play against each other." In comparing works with similar themes from different cultures, she uses the "axis of age and the specific psychological 'tensions' that often accompany various ages in women's lives" (7). The present volume continues Sizemore's interest in the hybrid and developmental nature of identity formation. In particular, Brill de Ramírez centers her discussion of the personal and tribal stories of a Yukon Native elder in the context of "the catastrophic consequences of Euroamerican colonization," particularly in the Klondike gold rush era (chapter 10). Wilson's examination of the crone in chapter 3 also places works of Lessing, Atwood, and Keri Hulme in a hybrid context, noting that all three writers "grew up in colonized cultures" and are "explicitly or implicitly critical of both literal and secondary or metaphysical colonialism." Warnock's study of *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Caribbean Canadian writer Shani Mootoo begins by acknowledging the postcolonial emphasis in earlier studies of the novel before addressing what she believes is its more central concern with childhood sexual abuse (chapter 11).

More recently, Sally Chivers in *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives* (2003) includes contemporary film as well as narratives in her examination of cultural

constructions of elderly women, “in order to devise new standards and strategies for understanding late life” (x). Singer in chapter 9 also notes the commingling of these genres, reminding us of the important role played by film in the popularity of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood stories. Pairing theoretical and literary works in creative ways, Chivers offers refreshing new insights into such staples of old age as grandmotherhood, the nursing home, and elderly female friendships—institutions important to several of the works discussed in this volume (see chapters 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 11). All these critical works help us devise “new stories and readings of growing old” (Chivers xxvi).

More than half the chapters in this volume focus on the works of Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood because both of these writers have, in recent years, explored with exceptional originality and depth the retrospective spiritual journeys of women of a certain age. Lessing, who at eighty-eight has produced a new novel (*The Cleft*), is a model for the continuing creativity, experimental courage, and fidelity to her own vision of the older woman writer. She has portrayed almost every conceivable aspect of midlife and older women’s “journey to age.” Lessing’s women embark on spiritual journeys that detour through erotic obsession, depression, cultural marginalization, and nostalgia. In most cases the movement forward is accompanied by a long look back that allows them to revisit, reevaluate, and reintegrate the past into their mature sense of self.

Atwood’s women “coming to age” are often, like Lessing’s, involved in retrospective experiences of self-definition and reinterpreted self-other communing. More earthbound and involved with their often problematic bodies than Lessing’s protagonists, Atwood’s older women must fight their way out of densely realized social contexts that, like a hydra, keep extending another tentacle when a previous one has been lopped off. Atwood foregrounds this exterior realm of behavior and place while mischievously interweaving cultural texts and contexts, such as horror stories, comic books, pop stars, mythic figures, science fiction, and quilts, seaming together the borders of the inner and outer, the individual and collective. Various stimuli in the present motivate the women’s spiral back—most often dialogues with those powerful others, present or past, who shared or shaped the structuring of their lives.

The last section of the book widens the examination of spiritual adventuring by women protagonists to include works by other contemporary women writers, including postcolonial and aboriginal women.

New structures and experimental techniques enter the book's conversation, such as fantastic journeys by older women picara figures (chapter 8), elder fairy tales (chapter 7), the role of film and the Internet (chapter 9), and the special shapes assumed by retrospective journeys for victims of childhood abuse (chapters 9 and 11). As well, the unique conflation of individual and cultural spiritual journeys in an aboriginal woman's tales is examined (chapter 10).

Part I of the book, "Doris Lessing: Spiraling the Waves of Detachment," focuses on Lessing's female protagonists in midlife or later decades, often in combination with narratives of aging by other women writers. In chapter 1 Virginia Tiger conveys the complexity and variety of modes of midlife awakening in her exploration of not only the "interior" voyaging of "Sarah Durham, the sixty-five-year-old protagonist of Lessing's *love, again*," but also that of "Avey Johnson, the sixty-four-year-old protagonist of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Candida Wilton, the fifty-something protagonist of Drabble's *The Seven Sisters*." Tiger delineates three different kinds of spiritual journeys—the movement by *love, again*'s heroine "from erotic obsession to detachment, *Praisesong for the Widow*'s heroine from complacency to transcendence, and *The Seven Sisters*' heroine from estrangement to engagement."

Lessing's exploration of the relationship between individual and collective spiritual becoming is investigated in my chapter titled "Navigating the Spiritual Cycle in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Shikasta*." Drawing extensively upon the Sufi underpinnings of Lessing's spiritual vision, I trace Lessing's movement from inner-space to outer-space fiction, exploring Lessing's mapping of her personal spiritual journey in the autobiographical novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* and her universalization and extension of this process to humankind as a whole in *Shikasta*. Extending the focus from the protagonist's journey to that of the author herself, I argue that *Shikasta* is the product of Lessing's own spiritual "coming to age."

In "Through the 'Wall': Crone Journeys of Enlightenment and Creativity in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Keri Hulme, and Other Women Writers," Sharon Wilson views older women's creativity through the looking glass of Medusa, "mother of all the gods," and, like Hecate, "the basis for crone figures in contemporary women writers' works." While Medusa is sometimes hated and feared, Wilson shows how Lessing in *Memoirs and Marriages*, Atwood in *The Blind Assassin*, and Hulme in *The Bone People* use "their Medusa vision to

discover creative possibilities within themselves.” Uncovering their reclamation of Medusa’s creative power, Wilson celebrates older women’s journeys to new growth and their ability for the first time to gaze on—and even embrace—shadowy, monstrous aspects of the self previously turned away from or denied. Exploring the journeys of a number of midlife and older women in Atwood’s poetry and fiction (as well as in the works of other women writers), Wilson moves us seamlessly to the second part of the book.

Part II, “Margaret Atwood: Doubling Back Through the Labyrinth,” focuses on Atwood’s devious narrative mirrorings of women adventurers in midlife and beyond. In “Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* as Spiritual Adventure,” Earl Ingersoll investigates not only Iris’s potential involvement in a crime, the suicide of her sister—the novel’s “whodunit” underpinning—but also Iris’s difficult, nuanced “triumph of the spirit” in her “contaminated but ultimately heroic” story. Ingersoll captures the novel’s tragicomic depiction of a physically and morally vulnerable narrator slowly and painfully creating her version of the past, of the truth, of herself. She may not have the time to finish her memoir, or, even more disturbing, she may not escape the “contamination” to “ensnare [her] readers, including [herself], in the ‘fiction,’ the ‘excusing yourself’ for the writer’s humanness.” Iris’s understanding of truth has also been complicated by her training in the feminine art of sacrifice. Ingersoll shows how not only are Iris and Laura bred for sacrifice but also, it seems, so are the men who die in the war. And finally, art itself demands sacrifice, as Iris acknowledges in commenting that “in Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys”—a comment that could apply to this volume as a whole.

Moving through the house of mirrors created by Atwood, we get another look at Iris as well as the three protagonists of *The Robber Bride* and their alter ego, Zenia, in Debrah Raschke and Sarah Appleton’s chapter, “‘And They Went to Bury Her’: Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* and *The Robber Bride*.” Noting the retrospective nature of Atwood’s midlife and older women’s search for identity, Raschke and Appleton argue that “the ultimate ‘answers’ are not always positive or affirming.” In particular, in *The Blind Assassin*, Iris’s journey is incomplete, her involvement in her sister’s death never adequately acknowledged. In contrast, in *The Robber Bride*, the three vulnerable protagonists complete the quest, confronting the power tactics of Zenia and their own inadequacies that she mirrors through her stories. Raschke and Appleton also take the reader

beyond the confines of the novel, relating Zenia's ruthless manipulation to the power tactics of the two Gulf Wars. They read the text as urging the reader, "imperative[ly]," "apocalyptic[ally]," to "set boundaries on the exploitation of 'raw' power"—that is all we can do.

Kathryn VanSpanckeren traces a special kind of journey—that of mythic female descent to the underworld—in her exploration of the narrative voices in Atwood's collection of poetry *Morning in the Burned House*. Adopting Atwood's own predilection for mythological figures, VanSpanckeren images the five sections of the poem in terms of Psyche's performance of four tasks given her by Aphrodite in order to find Eros, one of which was descent into the underworld. While no one poem fully captures the collection's thematic concerns with aging and death (one section of the poem is a eulogy for Atwood's father) or describes the journey to the underworld, VanSpanckeren argues that the poems as a whole "constitute this journey." The "alchemical" transformation undergone by the old woman speaker in the last section leaves her with the power to dare to discover her own destiny in the years that remain.

Part III, "Spiritual Adventuring by Other Contemporary Women Writers," examines the journeys of the spirit undertaken by older women in a variety of circumstances and cultural contexts, including essays on older protagonists in works by contemporary aboriginal and postcolonial women writers. Eros and the aged body are fancifully brought together in Fay Weldon's "genial" manipulation of "the scripts for the aging" in *Rhode Island Blues*, according to Roberta Rubenstein in chapter 7. Whereas Lessing presents a realistic look at the miseries of elderly erotic obsession, Weldon celebrates the joy and sense of new possibilities of Felicity Moore's attraction at eighty-three to William Johnson, eleven years her junior. As Rubenstein points out, Felicity is a rare character in contemporary fiction "who emphatically resists the cultural scripts of aging that assume erotic and emotional diminution." Rubenstein also notes the special role this novel plays in Weldon's oeuvre as it seems to constitute the author's own wishful thinking at seventy-three about possibilities for "women who dare to challenge the conventional cultural scripts of aging."

Another lively challenge to assumptions about aging, this time directed at the association of older women and stasis, is provided by Sally Chivers in chapter 8, "On the Road Again: Aritha Van Herk's *No Fixed Address* and Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*." Chivers holds up to the older women's experience the mirror not of symbolic travel back

through the imagination but of outrageous, amusing road trips that reconfigure how old age is constructed. Nowhere are cultural scripts more amusingly challenged than in *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* and *The Widows*. Chivers finds highly unlikely female picaresque characters in Van Herk's wandering protagonist drawn irresistibly into a passionate affair with an nonagenarian lover and Mayr's trio of older women friends headed back east to "take on Niagara Falls." These fantastic adventurers "manipulate the realist novel and experiment with time and space" to open the way for new stories and new imaginative possibilities for old age.

The older woman's journey back into the past can be particularly hazardous within the context of sexual or physical abuse, and the works exploring these problematic life reviews often take on unique narrative shapes. In Sandra Singer's chapter 9, Rebecca Wells uses the retrospective journey of the abused early midlife daughter to compassionately portray the physical and mental suffering of both mother and daughter in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* and its predecessor, *Little Altars Everywhere*. Perusing the scrapbook of her mother and her mother's friends, Sidda Walker journeys through suffering to healing and love, aided by the intervention of both her mother's friends and her mother, as Singer demonstrates. Singer also extends her examination beyond the confines of the two novels to encompass not only the film version of the *Ya-Ya* novel but also the intense female friendships formed through involvement of readers in *Ya-Ya* chat rooms and the regular online column by the author as other vehicles for reader growth.

A different approach is taken to women's retrospective journeys in Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's "Surviving the Colonist Legacy of the Klondike Gold Rush: A Native Woman Elder's Liberatory and Integrative Storytelling Turn." In this look at the stories of an elder aboriginal woman told to anthropologist Julie Cruikshank and reproduced in her book, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*, Brill de Ramírez offers us a fascinating example of an aboriginal woman's unique spiritual journey. Angela Sidney is able to reconcile her earlier shamanistic and Anglican spiritual practices with her late-life acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith through her ability to weave together a number of diverse threads: historical experiences with different manifestations of colonialism, Russian, American, and Canadian; powerful storytelling traditions that stress the "moral and ethical imperatives" of stories; and her ability to "interrelate . . . two

prophecy narratives.” Her openness to the various traditions and spiritual practices she is exposed to and her refusal to fall into the divisiveness often associated with colonized “missionization” is what defines her holistic spiritual and storytelling practice. In examining two of her stories, one personal and the other tribal, Brill de Ramírez notes how they both implicitly deal with the same difficult colonial experiences of her people and her family. While hardships are recounted, there is no rancor. Although her stories do focus on transformation, they are not, as Brill de Ramírez points out in a personal e-mail communication to the editor of this volume, about Sidney’s own transformation. “The focus is outward, offering potentially transforming stories for all our sakes.” For this aboriginal woman, the individual and the collective are inextricably combined: “the focus is on all coming together in unity” and “all becoming transformed through the sacred power of love, community and the sacred.”

The last essay in this collection traces a particularly harrowing late-life journey from silence and insanity to human interaction and sharing. In “‘Soul Murder’ and Rebirth: Trauma, Narrative, and Imagination in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Jeanie Warnock thoughtfully explores the complex narrative structure of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, particularly focusing on the intertwining between the first-person outer-frame narrative, in which Tyler, the nurse of elderly, withdrawn Mala Ramchandin, gradually wins Mala’s trust, and the inner narrative of Tyler’s “imaginative re-creation” of Mala’s memories. Drawn from Mala’s utterances and other sources, this inner narrative is split into different time frames, replicating the way these coexist within the present of Mala’s consciousness. Mala is enabled to undergo a life review by proxy through Tyler’s loving ministrations that partly heal the trauma of childhood and early adult sexual and physical abuse by her father. Most interestingly, Warnock explains how Tyler’s kindness to Mala in the present “reverberat[es] back into the past,” helping change Mala’s understanding of earlier levels of herself. Here the retrospective conarrative of Mala and Tyler not only transforms the present consciousness of the voyager but also reshapes her memories of the past.

All three sections of the book provide richly suggestive encounters with midlife and older women’s spiritual struggles. The works chosen do not highlight the breakthrough to any one kind of being and knowing; rather, they celebrate many richly varied kinds of retrospective journeys that midlife and older women take along the spiral of inner

growth. Often their spiral-like journeys back through self-assessment and self-discovery lead to new self-acceptance, sometimes even to a new level of consciousness. Along the way, some women adventurers acquire greater levels of detachment from previously polarized or limited modes of knowing and being and attain attachment to more holistic and spiritually attuned senses of self and other; at times, they become capable of witnessing the whole panorama of humankind's struggle to attain higher stages of integration and becoming. A few dare to embrace the transpersonal on their way to being more fully human.

The essays examining these works reveal the circumstantial richness, spiritual challenges, and inner integrity of each character's journey, wherever it takes her. Each of the writers contributing to this collection has likewise explored with integrity and thoughtful appreciation the various adventures undertaken by the midlife or beyond women characters, responding with sensitivity and openness to the difficulties and obstacles, as well as to the successes and breakthroughs that confront the women characters on their journeys along the life spiral. Over and over, we are privileged to discover not the decline into age but the evolution of individuals throughout the life course.¹² The creative works and the essays that celebrate these evolving journeys are adventures of the spirit possessing a symbolic force and cultural resonance worthy of our deepest yearnings. These studies not only enlarge our understanding of women's "coming to age" but also bear witness to literary experiences that are "potentially transformative aesthetic transaction[s] between reader and text" (Waxman, *Center of the Moment*, 2–3). As the editor, I have benefited from reading the textual encounters captured in these studies and, as a contributor, I have gained from my own interaction with Lessing's transpersonal spiritual adventures.¹³ I am deeply grateful for both opportunities. I hope that readers similarly will be enriched by their responses to these explorations of midlife and older women's adventures of the spirit.

Notes

1. I have chosen to use Ken Wilber's model of spiritual development for its breadth and depth. Like James Fowler's well-known study, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology for Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Wilber covers the first six stages of spiritual development. However, Wilber's map of consciousness continues with three more stages of transpersonal spiritual devel-

opment. Furthermore, Wilber's model of the development of consciousness is much broader than just stages of faith. It maps the evolution of individual and collective, subjective and objective consciousness. Within the domain of individual subjective consciousness, it encompasses the nine rungs of the ladder of self-awareness, the corresponding examination of the climber at each rung, and, finally, a look at the worldview of the self at each stage, including a different self-identity, self-need, and moral sense. "This model of consciousness development is based on the work of sixty or seventy theorists, East and West" (*Brief History* 132), of whom Fowler is only one.

2. Characterizing all of creation as consisting of an ever-expanding series of concentric circles or spheres, Wilber describes each sphere as corresponding to a "level . . . of being and knowing—ranging from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit" (*Integral Psychology* 5). Wilber explains that within this "Great Nest of Being," each larger sphere "transcends but includes its juniors, so that this is a conception of wholes within wholes" (5). Wilber identifies four quadrants associated with each sphere through all the waves of the Great Nest. These quadrants represent both individual and collective development viewed from the inside (subjectively) and the outside (objectively). For example, corresponding to the five stages of matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit are five kinds of technological/economic development: "foraging, horticultural, agrarian, industrial, and informational" (*Brief History* 40). Thus, as Wilber summarizes, "The worldview is the mind, the base is the body, of Spirit. These bodyminds evolve and bring forth *new worlds*" (ibid. 58, emphasis in original). I am only examining the evolution of self-identity.

3. Wilber draws this understanding from the work of Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, who, in *Spiral Dynamics*, characterize this breakthrough as "second-tier thinking" (qtd. in Wilber, *Integral Psychology* 48).

4. Following the first six basic stages, Wilber includes three more transpersonal realms, the "psychic" ("world soul"), the "subtle" ("deity mysticism"), and the "causal" ("pure witnessing self") (*Brief History* 183–205).

5. Sandra Singer uses this image in chapter 9. The phrase comes from the title of a collection of short pieces by Canadian women writers.

6. Jung in "The Stages of Life" notes that "we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning." The second half of life must be governed by the turn inward and the consideration of the meaning of "old age, death, and eternity" (399).

7. Barbara Waxman, in her introduction to *From the Hearth to the Open Road*, summarizes the findings of a number of critics examining women's earlier developmental paths, including two landmark studies, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* by psychologist Nancy Chodorow; and *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* by sociologist Carol Gilligan. Waxman also discusses the study of the female *Bildungsroman*, *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, edited by literary critics Elizabeth Abel, Mariane Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (*Hearth* 12–15). These studies emphasize the unique nature of women's psychological, social, and moral development and the unique patterns of the fictions that record them.

8. In *A Brief History of Everything* Wilber describes the immanent, descend-

ing nature of spirit, associated with the image of the goddess and with Agape, as the embodiment of diversity, the senses, the body, sexuality and earth, the compassionate embrace of relationship and the many. In contrast, the transcendent, ascending nature of spirit, associated with God, is connected to otherworldliness and to the “striv[ing] for the Good of the One in transcendental wisdom” (232).

9. See especially Waxman’s discussion of the desire to live intensely and the importance of work and love in the autobiographies of May Sarton, Audre Lorde, and Donald Hall in chapters 2, 3, and 4 of *To Live in the Center of the Moment*.

10. This phrase comes from a special issue of *Doris Lessing Studies* focusing on older women in Lessing’s works, entitled “Coming to Age,” edited by Ruth Saxton and Josna Rege.

11. Sizemore discusses *Praisesong for the Widow* in chapter 5 of *Negotiating Identities in Women’s Lives* and Doris Lessing’s novel on the mutually creative relationship between two women, one in midlife and one very elderly, *The Diary of a Good Neighbor* (part of *The Diaries of Jane Somers*), in chapter 6.

12. Gullette argues for an understanding of age that counteracts the decline narrative with an understanding of the evolution of identity throughout the life course (*Aged by Culture* 194–95).

13. See Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar for a discussion of the need to bring the self into one’s criticism.

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PART I



Doris Lessing

Spiraling the Waves of Detachment

CHAPTER 1



“Sleepers Wake”

*The Surfacing of Buried Grief in Doris Lessing’s
love, again, Paule Marshall’s Praisesong
for the Widow, and Margaret Drabble’s
The Seven Sisters*

VIRGINIA TIGER

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf observed back in 1929 that there were too few stories about the quotidian lives of women. Seventy-five years later, one regrets the shortage of salient stories about older women, fictional representations of that period in a woman’s life that one now terms “midlife” (Gullette 77) rather than middle age. Yes, we have Pat Barker’s *Union Street* and *The Century’s Daughter*; May Sarton’s *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* and *As We Are Now*; Doris Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Diaries of Jane Somers*; Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*; Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn*; Penelope Friendly’s *Moon Tiger*; Margaret Drabble’s *The Peppered Moth* and *The Witch of Exmoor*. But as the last two titles demonstrate, the dominant narrative paradigms are either decline into invisibility or—as in the case of the withering witch—eruption into excessive visibility.

What I propose to explore in this essay is the fictional representation of unanticipated interior journeys undertaken by three middle-aged matrons: Sarah Durham, the sixty-five-year-old protagonist of Lessing’s *love, again*, Avey Johnson, the sixty-four-year-old protagonist of Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Candida Wilton, the fifty-something protagonist of Drabble’s *The Seven Sisters*. While all three

face the diminution of forthcoming old age alone—two having been widowed and the third divorced—on the surface, the life circumstances of these three women could not be more different. Handsome, sensible, cool, collected, the two widows find themselves voyaging retrospectively—and eruptively—back to psychic landscapes buried, closed off, neglected, forgotten. Having committed sins of omission rather than commission, the third—now solitary in a small, shabby flat in a seedy borough of London—comes to regret the passive disengagement that marked her Suffolk life as conventional wife to a schoolmaster and mother of three (now estranged) daughters.

All three voyage physically, geographically, psychologically, and—in the case of Avey Johnson—spiritually. As she travels from London to the south of France and back, *love, again's* heroine will move from erotic obsession to detachment, *Praisesong for the Widow's* heroine from complacency to transcendence, and *The Seven Sisters'* heroine from estrangement to engagement.

Their journeys are prompted in part by older mentors, each one a female figure. For Sarah Durham it is the spell of Julie Vairon, the long-dead writer and musician whose romantic story—three lovers loved and lost, a child dead, a reclusive life ended by suicide—is the source for a collaborative drama Durham and others create. Long before the show is mounted, Sarah falls under Julie's erotic bewitchment. "I'm sick, [Sarah] said to herself. 'You're sick.' I'm sick with love, that is all there is to it. How could such a thing have happened? . . . I simply can't wait to go back to my cool elderly self, all passion spent . . . and she watched her reflection, which was that of a woman in love, and not a dry old woman" (186–87). For Avey Johnson it is a hallucinatory dream/memory of her Great-Aunt Cuney, resplendent matriarch of Tatem, near Ibo Landing on one of the Gullah-speaking Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. Geographically isolated from the United States, these Sea Islands sustained over the years sturdy African cultural traditions carried originally by transported slaves, the heritage that Great-Aunt Cuney will again kindle in the middle-aged Avey. "Moreover, in instilling the story of the Ibos [who, on their enforced arrival, took one long look and, understanding what was to come, turned around and walked right back, over the water], the old woman had entrusted [Avey, her young niece] with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion" (42). For Candida Wilton it is the elderly Mrs. Jerrold, the sibylline Latin scholar who teaches the

Aeneid to the seven women of the novel's title and accompanies them on their trip, following the path of the mythical Aeneas from Carthage to Naples to the temple of Hercules at Cumae, legendary home of the oracular prophetess, the Sibyl. "Far south, on the far African shore, the pale warm waves lap. Ruined temples, desert sands, dead languages, foreign tongues. These [northern English] women," observes the narrator, "keep faith with the past, they keep faith with myth and history" (171).

If, at the opening of each novel, all three have found themselves cast adrift, one comes to experience—and reexperience—that erotic obsession and emotional longing invoked by the far too simple phrase "falling in love," while the other, her Caribbean cruise interrupted by discordant dreams, physical malaise, and bizarre panic, unexpectedly agrees to an adventure, one that permits her to repossess the African/Caribbean culture and her own African American history, too long disavowed. When an unexpected inheritance suddenly broadens her solitary path, the third comes to renounce her journal's record of monologic whine and complaint, exchanging that entropic surrender for polyphonic and pleasurable participation in life and in friendship. "It would be good to travel in the footsteps of Aeneas," Candida remarks as she plans the trip for her cohort of "sisters." "He stepped whole and unharmed out of the flames of Troy and abandoned the dead . . . and went on his ruthless glittering way." She concludes, "there's a ruthlessness about him that appeals. . . . He followed his destiny" (135), a destiny that Candida will now come to be prepared to seek for herself.

Both *The Seven Sisters*, a middle-aged female recasting of Aeneas, and *Praisesong for the Widow*, a middle-aged female recasting of Odysseus, engage in a contemporary recasting of voyaging marked by three stages of the exterior *and* interior journey: departure, initiation, and return. In contrast, *love, again*'s Sarah Durham has a mythic model, Dido, and while she will not be immolated on sword and flaming pyre, the protagonist does descend into the underworld of inconsolable need, longing, and grief. As readers of *love, again* remember, the sixty-five-year-old Sarah Durham has been widowed for years, her grown children well past the need of her care, her mother remote and undemanding; thus are the traditional scripts for female protagonists set aside. So what script remains?

At the novel's opening the calm, composed, cool-headed Sarah Durham comes to stop before a mirror, a common trope for interrogation

of decline: "She looked at a handsome apparently middle-aged woman with a trim body. Her hair . . . was described as fair on her passport. . . . Surely by now she ought to have at least the odd grey hair? . . . She did not often look in the mirror: she was not anxious about her looks. Why should she be? She was often thought twenty years younger than her real age" (6). Her daily life revolving around a successful career as writer/administrator for a London fringe theater, she has not been intimate with any man since her husband's death twenty years earlier; her feelings about this are as composed as her feelings about her appearance: "She examined herself in the dim mirrors, switching on all the lights. Not bad, she supposed. She looked a handsome middle-aged matron. A hairdresser had improved her hair-do: a small smooth head went well with clothes more expensive than anything she had bought for years. At the theater, her colleagues commended her" (14). These Green Parrot colleagues become interested in a recently rediscovered feminist, Julie Vairon (a late nineteenth-century Martinique quadroon), whose haunting music and coolly intelligent journals become the basis for a play Durham writes to then be produced and performed. As rehearsals get under way, the company falls under Julie's erotic spell. Stephen Ellington-Smith, a wealthy patron of the arts, confesses he has been desperately in love with the long-dead woman. Sarah, who is described as having reached "the heights of common sense . . . the evenly lit unproblematical uplands where there are no surprises" (43), allows herself to become obsessed by a twenty-eight-year-old narcissistic actor, playing one of Julie's lovers. Following that assaultive *coupe de foudre*, Sarah discovers that the forty-year-old actor playing another of Julie's lovers has fallen in love with her and that she is more deeply in love with the thirty-five-year-old director of the play. For while *Death in Venice* is one of a host of intertextual allusions—by my count sixty-five—and an appropriate one for *love, again's* meditation on old age and romantic love, *A Midsummer's Night Dream* best suggests the atmosphere where the six other character actors and producers become besotted with one another, including the actress playing Julie, who falls in love with Stephen.

Readers smart most in the brine of Sarah's anguish, however, into which we are constantly submerged. Entering the state of desire the older woman had thought solely the prerogative of younger ones, over the ensuing year's inspection of her past—"trying to shine light into the dark places" (307)—Sarah Durham comes to recognize that the state of emotional disarray one describes as being in love has its

generative source in early infancy: the adult state of anguish is not only "what a baby feels when it is hungry and wants its mother" but also the baby's "longing for something just out of its memory" (350). At the end of her year's ordeal, she remains celibate. "To fall in love is to remember one is in exile and that is why the sufferer does not want to be cured" (350), concludes Lessing's purged narrator, having achieved by way of psychic journey the impersonal detachment characteristic of other Lessing wise women, like the person turning memory's leaves in *Walking in the Shade*, volume 2 of Lessing's autobiography. As Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis so succinctly summarizes: "In early old-age Sarah finds, on the other side of the whirlpools of masochistic love and debilitating grief, the space of detached observation and with it the beginnings of access to another dimension of reality" ("Whirlpool and the Fountain" 105).

That psychic voyage is abetted by the Julie Vairon tale, which acts as the inverse template for the conclusion, but not closure, of a contemporary tale about women released from the poison that is love denied. Like the structure of *The Golden Notebook* with its embedded notebooks, *love, again* interleaves entries from Julie's journals, which function as contrapuntal counterpoint to Sarah's erotic raptures and the negative excitement of romantic obsession. Julie's spinning down into her death in the river's whirlpool is recast in Sarah's descent, deeper and deeper, into a psychic whirlpool, "passing the stages of my age and youth, entering the whirlpool" (209). She observes that "forgotten selves . . . appear . . . like bubbles in boiling liquid" (209) and concludes: "She was obviously dissolving into some kind of boiling soup, but presumably would reshape at some point" (212). No female fatality, Sarah Durham is a survivor; she knows that in order to ward off "the dangerous animal that might attack from an unexpected place," she must never "relax vigilance" (342). At the end of the novel, readers revisit the very room we entered on the first page, whose inventory then amounted to a rehearsal of the protagonist's sensibility, a sensibility that would have to undergo change, including the excavation of hypocritical memory. Sarah's discarding the room's accumulated mementos at the novel's conclusion symbolically represents a stripping away of false memories. Just as she has inspected herself before the mirror at the novel's beginning, so at its ending she interrogates her image, seeing a woman now—after merely twelve months—ten years older. To be sure, the reader has been offered an epiphanic moment in a penultimate scene where, in a London park, a solitary Sarah watches a young

mother whose excoriating preference for her son and not the older daughter “awakens the suppressed memory” (Bell 491) that Sarah, too, had been rejected and unloved, her confident brother intensely much preferred. Thus does this sleeper awake, knowing her unquenchable craving for love had such an early—and benighted—source.

Not for nothing is the Lessing novel’s title hitched to a resonant musical quotation, Marlene Dietrich’s lifelong signature song, with its crystalline “Falling in love again, / Never wanted to . . .” As title, like *Sense and Sensibility* or *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, for example, *love, again* announces a theme, just as *Praisesong for the Widow*’s title declares that work’s intent. Important here is the novel’s cultural context: among different African tribes, praisesongs were (and still are) ceremonial and communal chants, traditional heroic poem-songs—“both sacred and profane” (Reyes 185)—celebrating kings, warriors, and gods in the vanquishing of enemies. Important for its adoption by Marshall, the praisesong historically paid homage to an individual’s transformative transition, frequently marked as a movement from departure through initiation and then transcendent return. In this context, *Praisesong for the Widow* is a tribute to the homecoming of a woman who succeeds in making an “awesome physical and spiritual odyssey,” as Abena Busia happily registers (199). As in *love, again*, crucial to the recovery of unacknowledged memories is the operation of dreaming. But, in contrast to the path taken by Lessing’s heroine, the psychic journey of Marshall’s heroine issues not in detachment but in the achievement of attachment: the embracing of confraternal legacies. For not only does Marshall’s widow come to address that widowhood, she also undergoes a literal and figurative journey, whose final, hard-achieved arrival amounts to spiritual enlightenment.

At the novel’s opening, the middle-aged Avey Johnson is silently, surreptitiously preparing to disembark from the *Bianca Pride*, her luxurious Caribbean cruise ship, intending instead to fly from Grenada back to her home in North White Plains, New York. For the three previous days, despite the companionship of her two female cruise-going friends, she had been distressed by a disturbing dream. In the troubled dream-waters, her Great-Aunt Cuney first beckoned her to come, then fought physically to force her to return to Tatem Island. This is where in the past Avey had spent summers as a girl engaged in ritualized walks to Ibo Landing with her great-aunt. Discombobulated by the fury of the dream, with the infuriated old woman raining blows, tearing her silk blouse, and yanking at her fur stole, the two brawling like

fishwives, like "proverbial niggers on a Saturday night" (45) before her scandalized North White Plains neighbors, Avey senses a battle has been joined. For in the dreamscape, she, Avey Johnson, is carefully dressed to accompany the successful Jerome Johnson (for years Avey has not called her husband Jay) at the annual reception given by her husband's Masonic Lodge. So disturbing still remains the dream that Avey is unable to place the stylishly dressed matron—beige crepe de Chine and pearls—reflected in the huge gilt-framed mirror in the *Bianca Pride's* dining room: "This wasn't the first time it had happened. . . . Shopping in her favorite department store, she would notice a black woman of above average height with a full-figured yet compact body coming toward her amid the floor-length mirrors. . . . And in the way she always did, she would quickly note the stranger's clothes. The well-cut suit . . . the muted colors. Everything in good taste and appropriate to her age" (48). In what will be this novel's reclamation of psychic regions by way of the mirror trope—present in each of the four parts structuring *Praisesong's* narrative's text—the protagonist interrogates the image not for signs of corporeal decline but rather for personal and cultural dispossession. The mirror's stranger is what Avey has become to herself, she—the novel insists—being representative of countless others who have by determined ambition and harder work acquired material, professional, and social ascendancy; succeeding so, they cease being in possession of their own being and that of their fructifying culture. Jay becomes Jerome Johnson, and the protagonist has stopped being Avatara (readers will learn later in the novel) to morph into Avey Johnson: "poise," "reserve," "the look of acceptability." "She would never be sent to eat in the kitchen when the company came!—*I am the darker brother / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes. . . .*—lines from the Langston Hughes poem Jay used to recite to her and [their daughter] Sis on Sunday mornings in Halsey Street" (49). Those were the early, intimate days in Brooklyn—before their ascendant move to the valiantly named North White Plains.

So the dream's battle is between what Jerome Johnson signifies and that which Great-Aunt Cuney maps. It is the task of this novel's middle-aged widow to embark upon an unanticipated journey to resolve that combat, permitting the mirror-stranger to become repossessed, a repossession involving new awareness: personal, communal, and spiritual. For, of course, Avey Johnson does not take a flight home to White Plains but instead will water-journey to what she will discover to have always been her first cultural home.

Not permitted by this essay's length is a detailed description of each stage of *Praisesong for the Widow's* depiction of renewal, with its casting aside of false skins of self. Let me summarize: after leaving the ship, Avey Johnson spends a disorienting night in a hotel, reviewing the draining thin of her marriage and the transformation of the subtle Jay to the grim Jerome Johnson. "How much had they foolishly handed over in exchange to the things they had gained," she asks herself, remembering the Halsey Street's "small rites [that] reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to a vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible . . . had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power" (137). The text at this point is laced through with references to the weeping, odorous infant, the opening of previously shut doors, as she brings to the surface long-suppressed memories (and not without narrative reason). Again the mirror trope instructs as the novel's heroine metaphorically fingers her own name. "The names 'Avey' and 'Avatara' were those of someone who was no longer present, and she had become Avey Johnson even in her thoughts, a woman whose face, reflected in a . . . mirror, she sometimes failed to recognize" (141), the now receptive woman has begun to understand. "Avatara" was the name granted her by Great-Aunt Cuney in memory of her own grandmother, witness those generations ago to the shackled Ibos' return by water to their home in Africa. Described as "a powerful myth of resistance" (Brondum 159), it is a tale of "simple emphatic rejection of oppression: foreseeing their fate in America upon landing in South Carolina, these chained slaves are said to have turned and *walked* back to Africa" (Courser 108). Grandmother Avatara passed the Ibo landing legend down through Great-Aunt Cuney, and she, in turn, to her niece, Avey. And Avey will come to reinhabit the many meanings of Avatara, during the course of the next two remarkable days.

Before repossessing her Avatara naming, that is, clothing herself in the mantle bequeathed her by her great-aunt, Avey must undergo several stages of purging, prompted first by a chance encounter with Lebert Joseph, an ageless, androgynous figure who, like the fabular Ibos, is able to envision beyond the material. A wily trickster figure (Pollard compares him to the Voodoo god Legba who "presents himself as an old lame man" [289], while Busia notes that Legba is "the name given in Ewe religious practice to the god of households and thresholds" [204]), Lebert Joseph comes to guide the quester through the several stages of rebirth. For Avey Johnson, these involve joining—as though

she herself has no will to refuse the bizarre undertaking—the Carriacou Excursion. An annual event, it celebrates in song, dance, and ceremony the “Old Parents” on a small island close to the coast of Grenada. In a boat trip en route to the out-island, Avey becomes uncontrollably sick, the liquefied waste spilling from mouth and anus—symbolically marking the expulsion of the past three, indeed false, decades of her life. For those ascendant decades were filled with, metaphorically as well as physically, overly rich, indigestible foodstuffs.

On the island, Lebert’s daughter, Rosalie Parvay, ministers to the stricken stranger. Described as singing in half-spoken, half-sung words, Rosalie coaxes the older woman through shame and disgrace. “A baby that had soiled itself!” (217), as Avey admonishes herself. Female hands massage the widow, just as that widow had once stroked her babies, in her full flush of youth and expectation. Rosalie “was lightly kneading the flesh across her shoulders and down her back. . . . And when she turned to the limbs . . . she not only oiled and kneaded them . . . but proceeded to stretch them by repeatedly running her hands down from a shoulder to a wrist . . . gently yet firmly pulling and stretching the limbs” (222). Avey Johnson finds herself remembering that back on Halsey Street this was the way she had stretched the limbs of her infants, preparing, strengthening, and shaping for the future their souls as much as their bodies. As the forgotten memories reemerge under Rosalie Parvay’s ministrations, a traumatic rebirth is enacted. The dense episode invokes the process by which Avey comes to be born anew, ready to take on meanings that transcend her own person and that of her family, ready to realize the meaning of the mystery told her by her Great-Aunt Cuney, ready to become an avatar of that mystery.

On Carriacou at nine the next morning, Avey Johnson joins in the communal rituals of the excursion: rites like the dance of the Big Drum, the lamentations of Beg Pardon, and the ennobling Praisesong, each of which expresses (as she intuits) “the innermost chamber of a collective heart” (245). The epiphanic moment of renewal for this awakened sleeper is not a moment of isolation but rather a moment of engagement with the ancestral collective past: “And for the first time since she was a girl, she felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads . . . which were thin to the point of invisibility yet as strong as the ropes at Coney Island” (249).

At the novel’s conclusion, Avey Johnson reclaims her childhood name and place—Avatara Williams of Tatem Island, South Carolina—to become part of “a huge wide confraternity” (191) stretching from

Carriacou, over to Harlem and Brooklyn and back to ancestral Ibo slaves, journeying by water back to Africa. Looking forward now, she plans to sell the White Plains house and return to Tatem, there to have her insistence answered that her grandchildren and many others come for summers and, at least twice weekly, ritually troop to Ibo Landing, there to tell again and again her great-aunt's ordained story. As Avatara remembers Great-Aunt Cuney remembering her grandmother Avatara, she describes that grandmother enacting the ancestral wisdom in the sentence "Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos" (255).

Substantial commonalities in the depiction of middle-aged female spiritual progress can be detected, sharing as each fiction does such tropes for the reclamation of psychic regions as the mirror; the weeping, odorous infant; opening and shutting doors. In my mapping of the journey in the final novel, Drabble's *The Seven Sisters*, there is a retracing of the uncertain steps of a woman negotiating the middle years of life. As the novel opens, Candida Wilton—recently betrayed by and divorced from her husband at the same time as she has chosen to remain distant, indeed alienated, from her grown daughters—is "immured in the middle ground between an outgrown past and an uncertain future" (14). As a close friend observes of their shared state: "We can't pretend that we are young anymore. So what are we, after all?" (206). This becomes the four-part narrative's overarching interrogation, with Candida experiencing her "ghost self" as a past that walks, then stalks, and a future that is lured to a canal bank, there in search of an enigmatic "ghost orchid." So rare that it emerges once in every fifteen years, this remarkable flora, glimmering with ghostly pallor in the depths of beach woods, seems as much a "blossoming of my ghostly self" as a "ghostly spirit in flower," she surmises (124).

Solitary by choice, Candida has surprised family and friends by leaving the yellow fields and large skies of the Suffolk countryside. Perversely, perhaps, she has installed herself in a small flat off Ladbroke Grove, a dark, dirty, menacing area under a grey gloomy London canopy. "Here I shall remake my body and my soul" (19), Candida notes in her daily laptop journal as she records her stasis in the novel's Part One, "Her Diary." In this section Drabble employs a device wherein the first-person diary includes third-person (italicized) editorial sentence summaries/commentaries that introduce the day's journal passages. "Nothing much happens to me now, nor ever will again. . . . I cannot help but feel that there is something important about this

nothingness. It should represent a lack of hope, and yet I think that, somewhere, hope may yet be with me. . . . If I immerse myself in [this nothingness], perhaps it will turn into something terrible, into something transformed. I cast myself upon its waste of waters. It is not for myself alone that I do this. I hope I may discover some more general purpose as I write. I will have faith that something or someone is waiting for me on the far side" (3). Immersion and being cast adrift, a beckoning from "the far side" of the liminal "waste of waters": each valuable phrase figures forth the spiritual voyage to be embarked upon by this heroine, should her initial "faith" in and "hope" about unknown futurity be sustained. A way of incorporating herself in some partial but mythic whole might perhaps be achieved, prompted as she has been by midlife "adventurous despair" (44). Like Avey Johnson and Sarah Durham, Candida Wilton will enter her own kind of whirlpool, one involving the questioning of fate's curious threadings. "My destiny," she writes as she considers the future, "has no shape and no direction" (60). Considering the past, she wonders whether she was always a pariah, without knowing it: "Was this lofty [London] solitude foreordained to be my destiny? A destiny stacked, laid, unalterably dealt?" (71).

Up to this time, Candida has lived most of her life unreflectively, accepting passively—even inertly—whatever has passed her way. Now she must actively interrogate her past, even as her days revolve around grocery shopping at the Eurogroceries Minimarket stocked with "Microwave Meals for One" and PriceCutter with its dump bin of food packets past their sell-by date (122), relentlessly writing in her journal each morning and visiting her health club, a gleaming new edifice ("I thought of Dido and the building of the city of Carthage" [13]) that has risen over what was until recently an adult education center where Candida had earlier taken a class on Virgil's *Aeneid*. Nights are given over to computer solitaire and retelling the sad story of her marriage, her ungrateful daughters, her old Suffolk friends: "I allowed two women to befriend me. . . . They co-opted me, and I failed to prevent them from doing so. . . . I have always been a passive person" (18). Nor would she seem about to make new friends, especially "with the kind of person who would want to be friends with a person like me" (51), as she censoriously describes herself in her diary entries. A review of her marriage reveals the remote, sexually inaccessible, and unsupportive wife Candida now remembers herself to have been for many of its last years. As dislocating as it is to live in the candor's cold light

and as relieved as she now is that she does not have to live with her sanctimonious husband for the rest of her life, she allows that “maybe it is from my shortcomings that all these rank weeds grew” (49).

Then there is her unhealthy obsession with the Grand Union Canal and her walks by the malodorous and plastic-littered waterway, across from which in the great Victorian cemetery’s trees she sees clumps of mistletoe hanging and imagines them, “suspended, like the Sibyl in her wicker basket” (125). Giving all but omniscient voice to the novel’s engagement with its mythic skeleton, the narrating diarist instructs: “The mistletoe . . . is magical. . . . It takes its green blood from a strange host. . . . It protects against witchcraft and the Evil Eye. It is green in the cold midwinter. Its berries are yellow-white. . . . When its sap dries, its dry leaves turn bright gold in death. The doves of Venus perched upon the mistletoe. It is the Golden Bough that leads us safely to the Underworld. These strange plants . . . are life and they are death” (125).

“I neither live nor die,” she announces. Inhabiting neither life nor death at the embarkation point of what will be a physical and spiritual voyage—herself surely as inert as the Sibyl who (according to legend), being immortal but subject to the withering of old age, was kept hidden in a cage suspended in the temple at Cumae where she uttered in a hollow voice, “I wish to die”—Candida surveys her corporeal being. “My skin is weathered, and wrinkles and crows feet don’t look as good on a woman as they do on a man. . . . I droop and I sag” (15). Slowly reassembling the truth of her past, she tries to find some talisman that will—like Proserpina’s beloved Golden Bough—bring the voyager back from Dis’s dark door. For not so much gloss as deliberate structure here in *The Seven Sisters* is book 6 of the *Aeneid* and that mythopoeia with its hero’s (fearful yet hopeful) crossing to the Styx’s further shore and descent into the underworld of the dead. As Candida well remembers, Virgil has the Sibyl warn Aeneas as he prepares to embark on his descent:

The way downward is easy from Avernus.
Black Dis’s door stands open night and day.
But to retrace your steps to heaven’s air,
There is the trouble, there is the toil. (Bk. 6, 11.187–90)

Set behind the mythic scrim of the *Aeneid*, *The Seven Sisters* interleaves other classical references, its valiant title alluding not just to

the Pleiades' constellation of seven stars that Candida can see through her flat's window. (Myth has it that, on their death, seven sisters were placed in the heavens by Atlas, their father, to form a constellation of stars; its rising in May marks benevolent spring showers, while its setting in November provides the autumnal stars of seed time.)

Then there are the seven spiritual sisters in the Virgilian reading group, whose classical names (Ida, Cynthia, Julia, Valeria) reassert Drabble's point that one lives in a palimpsest of epochs as well as memories. "Italian Journey," *The Seven Sisters'* Part Two—with its third-person omniscient narrator—has a borrowed title from Goethe's *Italian Journey*, where Goethe describes his perfumed walk along the Vita Sacra toward the Sibyl's cave, a walk that two centuries later the heroine (187) of "Italian Journey" will follow. Here we learn of a ferryboat named *Arethusa*, after the nymph who was changed into a fountain; a Tunisian hotel named Diana, goddess of moon and hunt; and—more curious still—the station stop and locality outside London on the Stansted Airport Express line named (in actuality) Seven Sisters. Early on, Candida mentions visiting this locality during her house hunting, and in *The Seven Sisters'* Part Three, "Ellen's Version," the diarist muses on the Seven Sisters Road, wondering how it "got its name" (255). (Indeed, it, too, has a palimpsestic provenance. Situated on Page Green, Tottenham, the seven sisters were originally a circle of seven elms that—in 1840—were said to be about five hundred years old. These trees were replanted in 1886 by seven Hibbert sisters, and then seven Lombardy poplars were planted in 1955 by the seven Bastian sisters. Legend and perhaps history hold that the site was an early grove, its name, Page Green, deriving from Pagans Green. The locations of the seven trees denote a place where victims were burnt at the stake.)

Candida taps out that she longs to visit Naples and the Phlegrean Fields, the birdless realms of Avernus, and the dark pit of Acheron before she dies: "*I Campi Flegrei*, the Burning Fields. *Lugentes Campi*, the Mourning Plains. I love the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*" (83). Recalling with a old chum from school days how once they studied together the sublime passage where the Cumae Sibyl tells Aeneas he must pluck the Golden Bough if he wishes to visit—then return from—the underworld, Candida reminds her friend that Aeneas was asking the proph-
etess about his destiny. Later she declares: "I would like to visit the Sibyl at Cumae and hear my endless fate" (69). Fate is a word that appears some fifteen times in the text, while destiny comes in second

at twelve, which is not without significance given that the protagonist is seeking a destiny that hitherto has remained stubbornly hidden, a destiny for which she may have been fated. Legendary Aeneas followed his destiny. Can Candida? Or will she remain—as she puts it—“passive victim of my fate” (149)?

Then the narrative begins to widen beyond the confines of Candida’s inspection of her past and interrogations about her future. Partly it is her visit to Mrs. Jerrold, the ancient classical scholar from the defunct Virgil reading group. Widow of some twenty years, her rich and embroidered history nowhere so visible as in her Notting Hill mews house filled with photographs, miniature landscapes, gilt and silver and rosewood and ebony frames, cushions, books, and plump chairs with deep hollows, this tough old bird is *The Seven Sisters’* Cumae Sibyl disguised as a colorful macaw, a bardic gypsy, a seer who can “see across to the further shore. Perhaps [muses Candida], if one spends much time with the long dead, one can see them clearly” (110). The phrase “further shore” is another reiterative marker, as in *The Seven Sisters’* very last—and italicized, unpunctuated—line: “*Stretch forth your hand, I say, stretch forth your hand*” (307). Interleaved here as narrative conclusion is book 6 of the *Aeneid* where the dead huddle at the river Styx’s edge: “They stood begging to be the first to make the voyage over and they reached out their hands in longing for the further shore” (Bk. 6, 2.313).

Not for nothing is Mrs. Jerrold depicted as once having been a poet of melancholic cast whose published poems bore such pointed titles as “Dido in the Underworld,” “The Birds That Perched upon the Golden Bough,” and “She Stands on the Sea Shore and Foretells Her Own Death” (104). Not for nothing is Mrs. Jerrold a seer who can imagine “the pale sad Candida” walking “forlornly by the dark canal with its scrubby weeds and its iridescent oils and its detergent odours. She sees her walk past the cemetery, with its broken wall and its cracked graves and its tilted funerary monuments. She sees her floating in the dank water, like Ophelia” (176). Prompted by this vision of her friend’s death by drowning, Mrs. Jerrold offers Candida simple but sage advice: “You can’t tell what the future will bring” and sends her off with a cautionary audiotape, whose gnomic watery wailings seem to Candida to be the “squeaking souls of the dead in the Underworld” (104) or someone drowning in a canal.

True to her sibylline prediction of destiny, Mrs. Jerrold’s advice proves prophetic. An unexpected inheritance permits Candida—with

her assembled sisters—to plan a voyage following Aeneas's path from the ruins of Carthage (where Aeneas abandoned Dido) to Naples and Lake Avernus (where, Golden Bough plucked and in hand, Aeneas entered the underworld) and then to the Sibyl's cave. Exultant as she begins to sail into a future hitherto hardly imaginable, Candida Wilton exclaims, "It was clear that fate had long intended that I go to Naples, Cumae and the Phlegrean Fields." Yes, she reiterates, "My journey, like that of Aeneas, was foreordained" (145).

At this stage in her spiritual journey, the heroine is described as "dying into life" (188), a felicitous recasting of the *Aeneid* descent, initiation, and ascent in book 6. Ardently active now, this once reactive woman has escaped a dark destiny of death by water. Sitting before the Sibyl's cave, in the novel's epiphanic rendering of renewal, the sleeper awakes. Mica glitters; thyme, lavender, and juniper scent the air; bees hover and butterflies move acquisitively amidst clambering purple and yellow flowers; a lizard basks upon a fallen marble torso; the episode resonates with richly conveyed synesthesia. Candida "feels both the lightness and the weight of her own body in the sunshine. She is heavier than she was in her youth and in her young womanhood and in her middle age, and yet she is also lighter, for she feels herself to be nearer to the dryness of the sun and to the purifying of the fire. The fluids are drying out of her skin and her limbs and her entrails. She is turning into a dry husk, a weightless vessel. She feels with a new pleasure the ageing of her flesh" (246). All in all, the scene offers a benedictory requiem for this heroine's acceptance of the steadfast approach of old age and therefore death. Anticipatory, drawn onward, stretching forth hands to a far shore where she wonders who awaits her—"Is it her lover or her God?" (247)—Candida Wilton accepts the wizened Sibyl's whispered advice. "I must learn to grow old before I die," she concludes. "That, I think, is what the Sibyl tried to say, on her blank tapes and her withered leaves" (281).

As resonantly as this benediction rings, it is but seeming resolution. For "Ellen's Version," Part Three of *The Seven Sisters*, rudely rips the reader away from equipoise with its jarring, indeed haranguing, first line: "What you and I have read so far is the story that I found on my mother's laptop accounts, after her mysterious and unexpected death" (251). An apparent suicide, Candida drowned herself in the Grand Union Canal, its lure—like that of the beckoning further shore of death's dark kingdom—being too great. Complicit with the estranged daughter, the implied reader—the "you" of the first line of

Part Three—comes to discover that Candida has hardly been candid. In both laptop accounts, “Her Diary” and “An Italian Journey,” there are lies of omission and lies of commission, according to Ellen, who is searching for clues to explain—then perhaps put to rest—her own offended anger. At one point, she underscores how “cold and cavernous [was the] home life of the Wiltons” (258). Charging her mother with being “an emasculating woman” (266), she insists that “it was my mother’s frigidity that drove my father into the arms of other women” (258). Then, there is the enraged castigation of Candida’s maternal indifference. As Ellen expostulates, “*There is no reference, in my mother’s entire narrative, to what I actually do . . . nothing, not a word, not a breath of interest in what I was working at*” (258–59, emphasis in original).

Enraged, resentful, verging on the vicious, Ellen accuses her mother’s accounts as being deeply unreliable, its “*faux-naïf* tone” (265) as being balefully irritating:

She knows more than she lets on. Or does she know? Either way . . . something odd happens to her tone. Why would one lie in one’s diary? (265)

Why, indeed? And then there is Part Three’s disorienting final paragraph. “According to Mrs. Jerrold, my mother never went to Cumae. She never walked alone up the *Via Sacra* and heard the immemorial bees. . . . None of them ever reached the Sibyl. Why should she invent a trip to Cumae?” (271), writes Ellen.

Except that Ellen does not write. Part Four, “A Dying Fall,” shudders into view with its first sentence, where we learn that Candida is both back in London and alive, having dressed herself in her daughter’s borrowed voice. “I don’t think I’ve made a very good job of trying to impersonate my own daughter or of trying to take my own life” (275), she opines. The narrative here oscillates between first- and third-person narrators, with the now habitual third-person (italicized) short editorial summaries preceding diary entries. That latter’s consistent gesture should have alerted the reader to Drabble’s deliberate—if intrusive—intent. But the competing focalizations in the plural text that is *The Seven Sisters* are no mere self-reflexive narrative gymnastic on the author’s part. The protagonist is being represented as “trying to escape the prison of her own voice” (264), an escape akin to her effort to break away from being locked “in the same body, the same words,

the same syntax, the same habits, the same mannerisms, the same old self" (275). And while Candida Wilton may harshly judge herself to be "back in the same old story," capable only of producing from her gaping mouth—like the dead warriors in Virgil's underworld—a tiny cry, readers must judge otherwise. For we know that the protagonist discovers what actually happened in her marriage, for example, and the nature of her relation to her daughter by her very act of masquerading as Ellen and in this guise lambasting herself with flaws, foibles, and lies.

In my view, the narrative strategy of *The Seven Sisters*, with its formal practices of partial concealment, delayed disclosure, embedded riddle, oblique clue, signifying gap, baffling crux, oscillating point of view, and intertextual engagement, has as its intention the positioning of the reader to follow innuendo, actively ferret out significance, and so become implicated as participant. Candida Wilton's effort is to achieve self-knowledge and, if she does not so permit or grant this for herself, the reader abstains from such a harsh critique. In my reading, for example, Candida does not invent her visit to the Sibyl, nor the wizened Sibyl's whisperings. A clue (for me) here lies in Part Four being titled "A Dying Fall." The intertextual allusion to *Twelfth Night's* sublime ode to music as the food of love is, in turn, connected to Berlioz's opera *The Trojans*, whose broadcast solitary Candida listens to at the novel's end. Transported by the overpowering joy of its triumphant presentation of the fall of Troy, she is filled with expectation. "Can the chorus be singing so gloriously about impending death?" (301), she wonders while sensing that she is being called to. By what? To where? And *The Seven Sisters'* very last line offers its other benedictory requiem, an open-ended one, for no period follows the last word.

Stretch forth your hand, I say, stretch forth your hand (307, emphasis in original)

Nevertheless, like *love, again's* Sarah Durham and *Praisesong for the Widow's* Avey Johnson before her, this now-voyaged heroine will reenter the demanding quotidian world, assuming the responsibilities of family and friends. Like the newly reborn Avatara Johnson, Candida Wilton trusts she will "keep faith with the past . . . with myth and history" (171), as Drabble's heroine puts it. And like Sarah Durham, she may soon look in a mirror and begin to see "the slow cautious look of the elderly" (349)—in the words of Lessing's heroine. Candida

Wilton will also know that she has achieved that state of “a multiple polyphonic” (172) personhood. Here she shares—with Sarah and with Avey—what Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis in her introduction to this collection delineates as the older woman’s “new, more capacious sense of self . . . [with its] acceptance of modes of self-knowing or being not possible before.”

Perhaps readers of these three novels may move some distance from the lament, traditional in its enquiry of beauty’s loss, that this concluding poem pulls—like flint to magnet—so painfully forward. The contemporary American poet Kathryn Levy titled the poem that follows—as it turns out serendipitously, for the purposes of my essay—“The Middle Way.” While it is this essay’s effort to subvert such terrors, one must review the poem’s insistent enquiry, one that I have argued each protagonist in the three examined novels confronted and transcended:

It has happened she said
staring at the mirror—but still
couldn’t believe it

so she walked outside
where a young man pressed
a body to his

and never looked up *So it must
have happened* she said
trying to believe

Please—tell me it hasn’t
she tugged at the arm
of her sleeping husband

he didn’t wake up
perhaps he was dead—had been
dead for decades

and never told her
—but she couldn’t believe it
something would change

she would sprawl on the grass
 with any one—a lover a husband some
 brand new self

and the tiny purple
 flowers would erupt—the un
 believable flowers

of a second of spring
 she would stop and lean
 over those bodies caught

up in their beauty
 —instead of returning
 in a trance to the mirror

where nothing
 but death stared back—the worst
 kind of death

the kind that goes on
 and on

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CHAPTER 2



Navigating the Spiritual Cycle in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Shikasta**

PHYLLIS STERNBERG PERRAKIS

As she reached her midlife and later years, Doris Lessing recorded the adventures of her spirit in both fictional and nonfictional works. While her two volumes of conventional autobiography are filled with useful accounts and insights into her life course, her fiction provides an even more powerful resource, particularly for her midlife and later years. *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) and *Shikasta* (1979), written in her mid-fifties and her sixtieth year, respectively, reveal a great leap in her spiritual evolution. The first book, an autobiographical novel, maps her personal spiritual transformation, while the second, perhaps her most complex and wide-ranging work, is a monument to her achieved spiritual vision. In *Shikasta* she universalizes her own spiritual journey and extends it to all humankind. In both books she uses the structure of a narrator's retrospective look at her/his spiritual journey. Lessing's dramatic change in narrative style between *Memoirs* and *Shikasta*—her move from inner-space to outer-space fiction¹—offers us a fascinating example of midlife creativity.² Lessing herself describes how “as I wrote [*Shikasta*], I was invaded with ideas for other books, other stories, and the exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope, with more capacious possibilities and themes” (“Some Remarks” ix).

I will argue below that in *Shikasta* Lessing finds her mature spiritual voice and vision. Part of the style change that characterizes Lessing's innovation in *Shikasta* concerns its large scope. *Memoirs* and *Shikasta*

* I wish to thank my colleague Jeanie Warnock for carefully reading an earlier version of this chapter and offering helpful suggestions for its revision.

employ spatial metaphors on totally different scales. In *Memoirs* Lessing uses the metaphor of the house to convey the different modes and potentials of individual consciousness. In the outer-space fiction of *Shikasta*, Lessing uses the spatial metaphor of other worlds (literally, other planets and star systems) to portray beings with different levels of spiritual development. Both the individual and collective spiritual journeys, however, are presented through the retrospective reflection of mature narrators and their interaction with younger counterparts. This essay will examine both the growth in retrospective insight achieved by characters within each novel and the development of Lessing's own creative artistry—the maturing of her spiritual vision—that emerges in its full power in the latter novel.

In both *Memoirs* and *Shikasta* Lessing reveals the fruits of her own retrospective examination of her life as well as her long study of the means by which the individual becomes attuned to her inner spiritual potential and then lives out that attunement in relationship to others and to the divine.³ Since Lessing is a self-acknowledged Sufi and has also written about her experience of Jungian analysis, I will use both Sufi and Jungian doctrines to help explain her vision.⁴ Furthermore, since the earliest formal Sufi orders began in Persia (Galin 197–98), I will also enrich the insights drawn from Sufi doctrine with commentaries and expansions on them by Bahá'u'lláh, the Persian-born prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith.⁵

Memoirs of a Survivor: Lessing's Spiritual Autobiography

Although Lessing called *Memoirs of a Survivor* “an attempt at autobiography,” this comment was originally ignored by critics because Lessing camouflages the story of her spiritual transformation under the guise of fiction and fantasy. Roberta Rubenstein is one of the exceptions, and in her groundbreaking *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing* (1979) she characterizes *Memoirs* as “a kind of artistic history of the development of consciousness in her [Lessing's] characters as well as in their creator” (220). Lessing herself provides the best gloss for *Memoirs* in *Under My Skin*, volume 1 of her more recent, conventional autobiography. She comments that *Memoirs* is about a middle-aged person observing a young self grow up. She ties the waves of violence that sweep by in the form of “gangs of young and anarchic people”

to the “general worsening of conditions . . . [that] has happened in [her] lifetime.” Furthermore, she notes that the rooms behind the wall grew out of the idea of writing a kind of “dream autobiography.” Behind the wall “two different kinds of memory were being played, like serial dreams.” On the one hand, she mentions the general, communal dreams, “shared by many, like the house you know well, but then find in it empty rooms, or whole floors, or even other houses you did not know were there, or the dream of gardens beneath gardens, or the visits to landscapes never known in life.” These communal dreams suggest those unknown aspects of the psyche that contain the collective experiences that have shaped and conditioned cultural values and attitudes. On the other hand, Lessing writes of “personal memories, personal dreams” using “the nursery in Teheran, and the characters of my parents, both exaggerated and enlarged, because this is appropriate for the world of dreams” (*Under My Skin* 29). Here we seem to be in the domain of what Jung called the personal unconscious where archetypal images like the Mother and the Father are clothed with individual experiences and emotions (Young-Eisendrath and Dawson 320).

Perhaps the key symbol that Lessing uses in her dream memoir, however, is that of a luminous face, both familiar and strange, first briefly sighted or sensed on the Survivor’s second visit to the communal rooms behind the wall. Associating the face less with a vision than with a feeling of “sweetness . . . a welcome, a reassurance,” the Survivor recognizes that “this was the rightful inhabitant of the rooms behind the wall. . . . The *exiled* inhabitant” (14, emphasis in original). The first sighting of this figure represents a brief intimation of inner depths and capacities not previously imagined or realized by the Survivor. This symbolic call from the spiritual heart deep within initiates the psycho-spiritual journey of Lessing’s alter ego, the Survivor, toward attunement with an unknown dimension of the self. Her growing sensitivity to the unseen presence of this figure in her forays into the unconscious realm delineates the stages and seasons of her inner growth. Along the way she must wrestle with the demons she encounters—both personal and collective—until, having brought light into these dark regions, she is able to accept and honor personal shadows and relinquish outmoded collective understandings. Slowly transformed by the new psychic energy and potential she releases, increasingly attracted to intimations of the luminous face conveyed in highly charged symbolic scenes, the Survivor’s spiritual understanding grows until she is prepared at last to recognize and attune herself to the inner potential that has been there

from the beginning, waiting to be recognized, and to follow the figure who is both inner guide and transpersonal symbol, both within the Survivor and beyond her.

For the Survivor to access the inner potential symbolized by the luminous face, she must, according to a Sufi saying, die before she dies—meaning she must die to the ego in order to open herself up to the real center of her psyche, which is her inner self or soul that connects her with the transcendental (Vaughan-Lee 94). The ego here is associated with what Sufi psychologist Robert Frager calls the tyrannical self, the self dominated by “egotistic impulses that are often deeply unconscious” (3). While, for many contemporary thinkers and psychologists, this ego is the normal center of the conscious self, for the Sufis this psychological level of self, consisting of one’s desires and emotions, is only the first and most limited level of self, completely out of touch with one’s inner potential and the creative powers at work in the universe (*ibid.*). One psychologist who does theorize about a deeper level of self is Carl Jung, who identified an inner dimension of the psyche called the “Self,” which he characterized as the center and governor of the psyche, “a psychic totality and at the same time a centre, neither of which coincides with the ego but includes it, just as a larger circle encloses a smaller one” (142). According to *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, the Self is “experienced as a transpersonal power which invests life with meaning . . . towards which the individual is unconsciously striving” (Young-Eisendrath and Dawson 318). Jung names the process whereby the individual becomes attuned to the Self as that of individuation.⁶ Elsewhere, I comment that “because this new center [the Jungian Self] is not accessible to the ego it can feel like an alien being. Thus the ‘self’ is sometimes personalized as a separate being or force” (“Sufism” 106). Thus from a Jungian perspective, the Survivor’s encounter with the luminous face may be thought of as an encounter with the Jungian Self.

However, this is only the beginning of our understanding of the significance of the luminous face. In the literature of the Sufis we get a much fuller discussion of the capacities of the inner world (Frager 108), and a brief investigation of this tradition will enrich our understanding of both the Survivor’s spiritual journey and the significance of the luminous face. Frager, for example, speaks of the potentialities for developing the conscious self far beyond the tyrannical self emphasized in contemporary thinking and lists seven “different levels of development . . . founded on references in the Koran” (49). To

discuss the process whereby the self becomes increasingly at one with its inner spiritual potential and accesses some of these deeper levels of being, I will use the term “detachment.” I use this term because it is used in Sufi and other spiritual traditions to characterize the freeing of the individual from distracting obstacles or claims of the lower self so as to allow the person to realize his or her spiritual potential. Focusing on the place of the will (or motivation) and of the heart (the metaphorical seat of the attraction of the self to intimations of the divine) in this process, I will examine the interface between the will, the heart, and the mind (or understanding) in the Survivor’s spiritual journey.⁷ In the spatial metaphor that Lessing uses, the Survivor will develop her spiritual capacities through her experiences on both sides of the wall—through her conscious reliving of her memories of her past behavior in her interaction with a younger version of herself (on the realistic side of the wall) and through her access to unconscious personal and impersonal conditioning in the rooms behind the wall (the symbolic side of the wall). As she purifies her heart, disciplines her will, and strengthens her understanding, the Survivor encounters a series of symbolic spaces behind the wall: the room she cleans and paints; the six-sided meditative room in which she participates in archetypal activity; the collapsing walls of the impersonal rooms through which she observes new growth and senses the luminous face; and the multi-layered gardens, a vision of which she brings with her to the conscious world. These spaces—and her responses to them—are benchmarks on the Survivor’s journey to new levels of inner growth, leading to her encounter with the deepest level of inner being.

As I mentioned above, the Survivor’s initial motivation for beginning the difficult process of spiritual growth comes from her brief, early sighting of the luminous face—an early intimation of unknown possibilities within and without. The inner luminous face exerts on the Survivor the kind of attraction that is consonant with the claim suggested by Emanuel Levinas’s dictum regarding the face of the other. The Survivor feels an attraction that is prior to consciousness and intellectual thought. Levinas has written at length on the prior moral claim of the other, which for him is embodied in the figure of the face of the other. Lessing’s face suggests the prior moral claim of the deepest self and the divine spark within—for Levinas, the “movement that sustains knowledge while remaining outside of knowledge is that of the ethical situation” (Cohen 6). Lessing places that ethical situation within a spiritual framework and investigates the claim of the spirit on

human existence. Her novel suggests that what sustains being is the movement toward recognition of, and attraction to, that which makes being possible—its radiant, transcendent, inner divine spark, which is neither wholly within nor wholly without. Thus, the luminous face is an entity connected with being that is not limited to being but partakes of something beyond being. Many religious traditions refer to this entity as the soul, and the Sufis, according to Frager, delineate “seven facets of the complete soul” (96).⁸ The last or innermost facet, “the secret of secrets,” is the realm of the transcendent within the “heart of the heart” (Frager 109, 110). The great Sufi philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi has, at times, personified this facet and given it the name of Khidr, “an archetypal symbol of our inner essence, and . . . also the guide that reveals this secret” (Vaughan-Lee 15).⁹ For Ibn ‘Arabi this figure represents the individual form that the encounter with the divine takes for the individual (Corbin 61). “He [Khidr] is the ‘part allotted’ to each Spiritual [being], his absolute individuality, the divine Name invested in him” (ibid. 62–63). Interestingly enough, Jung, too, uses Khidr, who is found in the eighteenth Sura of the Koran, as an example of the personification of an unknown inner dimension, in Jung’s case the Self, which feels alien to the ego (Jung 141).¹⁰ I will focus on the Sufi understanding of this inner dimension, as I feel it offers the richest interpretation of the Survivor’s inner experiences. Thus the luminous face, like Khidr in the Sufi tradition, seems to be a personification of a spiritual encounter. It allows the Survivor to witness her own divine nature, to be attuned to the form that the divine spark takes within her and thus to the transcendent otherness of the self.¹¹ It is this dimension of the self that comes from and connects one to the divine. Having an encounter with this level of one’s being is perhaps what Mohammed is suggesting when he declares, “He who knows himself knows his Lord” (qtd. in Harvey 143).

Early writings of Bahá’u’lláh, which are infused with and often interpret and clarify Sufi symbols, provide further insight into this understanding of the deepest self. In *The Book of Certitude* Bahá’u’lláh provides the preconditions for the spiritual search that allows the individual seeker to gain knowledge of both God and his/her inner being. Both detachment and attachment are necessary as the seeker must “cleanse and purify his heart . . . from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge. . . . He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy

and ephemeral attachments” (192). Much of the search that Lessing describes in *Memoirs* is the process whereby the Survivor’s heart is so cleansed and purified that, in Bahá’u’lláh’s words, “no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth” (ibid.). Although in this state the seeker is not trapped by “limiting, particularistic attachments” (Saiedi 142), the spiritual seeker is still not absolved of concern for others but instead is required to respond to the plight of other human beings as well as to “show kindness to animals” (*Certitude* 194).¹²

Much Sufi literature is also taken up with the need for the assistance of a spiritual guide, and classical Sufi mystics place their spiritual journeys under the umbrella of Mohammed’s teachings.¹³ Although Lessing has written in *Walking in the Shade*, volume 2 of her conventional autobiography, about her search for spiritual guidance and her realization of the need for a teacher or guide, leading to her eventual adoption of Idries Shah as her spiritual mentor (350–57), in *Memoirs* Lessing does not portray the intermediary of a human guide or attunement to a prophetic figure. Rather, she portrays only an inner spiritual guide (akin to Khidr) in the luminous face and captures the moment of inspiration in which she first catches a glimpse of this guide and thus of her own inner spiritual being. Thus the luminous face seems to function both as the embodiment of the spiritual spark within her soul and as an intimation of the station of purity of heart that will allow her attunement to that spark. Although the Survivor’s early sighting of the face suggests that she has a brief intimation early in her journey of her inner spiritual being, she cannot sustain this vision until she has progressed along the path to detachment.¹⁴ In particular, the path to a sustainable vision of the Survivor’s deepest self must traverse the realms of the Survivor’s individual and collective unconscious, especially those areas of cultural conditioning and individual psychic formation that have arrested her growth, causing psychic imbalance and spiritual underdevelopment. In order “to cleanse and purify her heart,” the Survivor must deal with all kinds of unfinished business, both personal and collective. She must journey back into the past and deep within in order to move forward. A powerful impetus for traversing that difficult psychospiritual road occurs in the Survivor’s outer world when she is presented with a unique opportunity to reexamine her earlier life.

Although the narrator’s first visit to her communal unconscious world was spontaneous and unplanned, to investigate deeply this area

of her psyche she needs a link between her ordinary life and the world within that will facilitate her access to the realm of unconscious memories and dreams (see Vaughan-Lee 66–68). Such a link is provided when the Survivor finds herself left to care for a young girl, Emily. Caring for Emily allows the Survivor to engage in a retrospective process of reseeing and reunderstanding her earlier life in order to facilitate her movement along the spiral of inner transformation; that is, to make that journey inward the narrator must observe, care for, and above all accept responsibility for her younger self. To aid the Survivor in this task, a companion of Emily's suddenly materializes, the animal Hugo—an animal shaped like a dog with the face of a cat. Yellow, with a harsh and rough hide and a long, whiplike tail, Hugo is “an ugly beast” (21); his outer ugliness is a reflection of the abuse of the physical and natural in the Survivor's world.¹⁵ Representing Emily's bond with the natural world, Hugo is threatened by the growing harshness and violation of pavement life where food is increasingly in short supply and the keeping of a pet is an unheard-of luxury. Furthermore, Hugo's suffering when Emily deserts him to spend her days on the pavement suggests he also represents a deep bond with aspects of her instinctual self that she is violating in her need for acceptance from her peer group. Indeed, his powerful presence ties him to one of the symbols of the Self described by Jung as “a helpful animal representing [the Self's] instinctual nature and our primal connectedness to our surroundings” (Vaughan-Lee 181). As such, he seems to be an early form of inner authority that grounds Emily and thus the Survivor in her spiral-like journey back and up the spiritual path. Using Frager's terminology, Emily seems to feel a deep bond with her animal soul,¹⁶ which she expresses through her loyalty to Hugo.

If Hugo's role as inner witness of neglected aspects of Emily's psyche is to wait and mourn for Emily, the Survivor's work as she waits and watches with Hugo is that of the observer, learning to recognize and understand the patterns of behavior that governed her younger self. For example, when Emily chooses not to leave with the first youthful gang, the Survivor understands that her younger self had been faithful to her inner core, to the primary bond with Hugo. Here Lessing seems to be giving a symbolic version of choices she made in her younger life that she now understands and accepts as crucial to the person she became.¹⁷ This understanding leads the Survivor to an archetypal vision of another kind of room behind the wall, a six-sided meditative space where people fit bits of cloth to a pattern of a Persian rug whose colors

come to life when the matching fits.¹⁸ This observation and discovery of how the elements of everyday life fit into the larger archetypal patterns of existence, preeminently the work of the artist and the spiritual seeker, is the Survivor's present concern. She also understands that her early refusal to be caught up in the trends of her day has safeguarded her ability to participate in this ongoing psychic activity. Her greater insight into and acceptance of her earlier choices is one of the signs of her spiritual growth.

The Rooms Behind the Wall

While the Survivor's outer life is spent observing Emily and the chaotic pavement life, that is, communing with her conscious memory, in the impersonal rooms behind the wall the Survivor discovers various kinds of inner work that she must perform, leading to different forms of detachment. As she cleans and prepares the walls of a drawing room behind the wall and wipes off the old grime, she is symbolically stripping away the obstacles that have barred her from getting in touch with her deeper self. The Survivor's cultural conditioning is suggested by rooms crammed with old furniture—none of it clean or in good repair (24–25). Clearing out the outmoded ways of thinking and believing suggested by the shabby furniture is the first step in the purification of the Survivor's inner being.¹⁹ This is also part of the process of cleansing the heart from all remnants of either love or hate, the essence of learning detachment from culturally instilled limitations in order to access one's inner potential. But such psychic work cannot be done without facing resistance from the power of what Jung calls the "shadow," those aspects of the personality that the "conscious ego does not recognize in him- or herself" (Young-Eisendrath and Dawson 319). Here Lessing seems to portray the shadow of the collective rather than the individual unconscious, embodying both the repression of aspects of reality and the institutionalization of coercive patterns of thinking and behaving.²⁰ This collective shadow seems insidiously to undermine or undo the work of bringing to consciousness the old patterns of thinking and believing that have held the Survivor and her culture in their grip. Neatly ordered rooms, which were restored one moment earlier from confusion, are the next moment reduced to chaos as if subjected to "a poltergeist's tricks" (63–64). On one level these violent changes reflect the violent emotional volatility of Emily's adolescent moods in

the outer world, and, on another level, they force the Survivor to recognize the difficulty in changing deeply ingrained “coercive patterns” (Shah, frontispiece of *Walking in the Shade*). In applying coat after coat of fresh paint to the wall of the drawing room behind the wall, the Survivor is preparing a clean, safe space in her inner world where new psychic discovery is possible. Again Lessing’s spatial metaphor allows her to characterize another mode of consciousness, the space of emptiness and detachment, which is the necessary first condition for the spiritual search (Bahá’u’lláh *Certitude* 192).

The impersonal rooms, however, are only one dimension of the unconscious; the Survivor must also visit the personal realm behind the wall, where again she must begin the work of cleansing the heart, in this case of the traumas of her early life. Such traumas must be revisited and integrated into the psyche if the self-discovery and self-acceptance that leads to inner change is going to take place. Encountering Emily’s father’s abusive tickling—“her [Emily’s] body was contorting and twisting to escape the man’s great hands that squeezed and dug into her ribs, to escape the great, cruel face that bent so close over her with its look of private satisfaction” (87)²¹—and her mother’s failure to meet her young daughter’s physical or emotional needs, the Survivor must cope with Emily’s emotional deprivation, hunger for love and acceptance, and overwhelming guilt—all of which become embodied in the sound of a child crying. The Survivor, searching room after room, never finds this child. However, as the Survivor brings to light and consciousness the dark places in her own and Emily’s psyche, the interior and exterior worlds become closer together. Hearing the sound of a small child crying in both worlds, the Survivor is eventually able to locate and succor one manifestation of this crying child, Emily’s mother, and thus symbolically come to terms with her own early pain through nurturing and forgiving her mother. When the Survivor picks up the frantically crying, desperately needy mother-as-a-child, “[a] pretty, fair little girl . . . at last find[s] comfort in my arms” (149).

The changes that the Survivor is undergoing allow her to be aware of two opposing forces in her life, one deeply positive, the other seemingly destructive, as if she is straddling two worlds. This dialectic of opposites is important in describing the spiritual journey.²² We first see this tension explicitly described in the scene in the impersonal rooms where the Survivor prepares a clean, safe place for her inner journey. As she cleans and paints, she feels herself “in a continuing relation to the invisible destructive creature, or force, just as I was with the other

beneficent presence” (65–66). Part of what the Survivor will learn on her spiritual journey is to accept and work with the destructive element.

The Dialect of Detachment and Attachment

The dialect of opposites plays another kind of role in the constant rhythm the Survivor experiences between gaining perspective on, and detachment from, old attachments and feeling attraction to a new way of becoming and being. This rhythm of detachment and attachment can also be described as a “dialectic of negation and affirmation,” which centers on “relinquishing self-love in order to become united with the beloved” (Saiedi 102–3).²³ This rhythm operates on the various levels of the Survivor’s experiences. For example, the gift for the Survivor’s increasing detachment from the devolution of the old ways, symbolically described as a nameless “it,” is her capacity to experience a powerful alternative vision in the inner communal world—an edenic scene in which she encounters layer upon layer of fruitful gardens—an image of “the plenty . . . the richness and generosity” of the food-giving surfaces of the earth (158).

The movement of the water through the beautiful garden that the Survivor visits beneath the earth’s surface is another expression of the dialectic of attraction and detachment, now imagined as a cycle of expansion (the melting of the water) and contraction (the water’s evaporation).²⁴ The water running through the runnels and surrounding the beds in the garden is fed by water from the snow-capped mountains in the distance, carefully controlled by the gardener, whose duty is to see that it “ran equally among the beds” (158). This movement of the water through the garden also suggests the flow of blood from the heart to the rest of the body, an analogy found in much mystic literature in which the heart is compared to a garden.²⁵ If the garden is symbolic of the heart, then the gardener embodies the spiritual understanding that keeps clear the channel for the flow of the water of the spirit through all aspects of the individual’s life.

The rhythmic cycle of “expansion and contraction” associated with the heart-garden symbolism structures *Memoirs*. It is perhaps best represented by the Survivor’s movement back and forth between the conscious world of memory and reflection, as well as the inner worlds of personal and collective unconscious discovery. Detachment from

the outer world, a kind of contraction or purification of the heart, feeds attachment or attraction to the discoveries of the inner worlds, where the Survivor's inner being expands and develops. Each feeds the other—understanding acquired through her observation of her past as embodied in Emily affects what she can perceive in her inner worlds, and this deepened spiritual understanding in turn stays with her and alters her perceptions and behavior in the outer world. The Survivor's ability to see the futility of Emily's (and thus her own) earlier attempts to apply purely material solutions to cultural devolution in the outer world (she pictures Emily's fruitless work in the commune as the work of a "sorcerer's apprentice" set to sweep dying leaves in a "spiteful garden" [152]) frees the Survivor to view the various impersonal rooms of the inner world as if "from above" or to "move through them so fast that I could visit them all at once and exhaust them" (156). It is only after acquiring this detachment in the inner and outer worlds that the Survivor is enabled to see the multilayered gardens. The culmination of the garden scene and the gift of the Survivor's new detachment is her intuitive awareness of that "person whose presence was so strong in this place, as pervasive as the rose-scent" (158). Following this moment of attunement to her inner spiritual guide, the Survivor becomes capable of maintaining "a knowledge of that other world, with its scents and running waters and its many plants, while I sat here in this dull shabby daytime room . . . as if that place were feeding and sustaining us, and wished us to know it" (159). We will see below that this new knowledge will allow the Survivor to deal with increasingly difficult experiences in the outer world.

Buoyed by the new hope that her sense of the luminous face brings, her spirit expanded by growing attunement to the divine spark within, the Survivor is now prepared to face the culmination of the devolution in the ordinary world—the discovery of the new breed of children. The final efforts to gain the necessary detachment to deal with the children will enable the Survivor to complete her journey of transformation. As opposed to the luminous face sensed in the collective dream world, these children represent the monstrous face of a terrible new birth, the outbreak into the daytime world of humankind's undealt-with collective shadow.²⁶ Brought into the world by the destruction of old modes of organizing society and grounding the self, these children point both to the utter failure of these old modes of being and to civilization's total ignorance of other ways of understanding itself—its lack of awareness of its psychospiritual underpinnings and of a spiritual center capable

of holding together the disparate forces of modern life. Political and social forces alone as modes of organization have been proven inadequate by the collapse of Emily and Gerald's commune, and Gerald's desperate clinging to his concern for the cannibal children leaves him their victim, not their leader. The children's spiteful and totally anarchistic vitality is the underside, the denied shadow, of a purely material understanding (whether individualistic or communal) of well-being. Gerald's inability to give up on the children again reminds one of Levinas's dictum of the moral claim of the other. Here Lessing seems to suggest that this claim cannot be fully realized without being placed within a spiritual framework. It is the journey toward a purified heart that will allow the Survivor finally to realize the moral claim of the cannibal children and to bring them with her into another realm of understanding and being.

The Survivor's journey to detachment is not done in isolation but instead involves commitment to those in need around her. Rescuing a despairing Gerald from destruction by the children, Emily, along with the Survivor and Hugo, presents a counteractive force to the devolution of the outer world. The four of them now united in the Survivor's apartment wait out the long, dark winter of spiritual trial and patience, a necessary time of purification and suffering before they can be admitted again behind the wall, this time to encounter one last symbol of the old world—a black pockmarked iron egg.²⁷ Polished by their painful efforts to develop and grow, pockmarked by their errors and shortcomings, this symbol of their old way of being breaks open when confronted with the presence of not only Emily, Gerald, and Hugo but also Emily's mother and father and four-year-old Dennis, one of the cannibal children holding Gerald's hand. The presence of all these figures together marks the Survivor's ability to acknowledge, understand, and accept the aspects of reality these figures embody as essential to who she is. She brings with her in her experience of psychospiritual transformation Emily, her younger self; Gerald, the symbol of her social conscience; her parents, who have helped shape her personal psychic life; the instinctive energy of the physical and the natural world of Hugo; and the untamed, irrational vitality of the personal and collective shadow, the cannibal Dennis.

Through her work of inner purification, detachment from outworn modes of thinking and believing, and acknowledgment and acceptance of painful familial patterns, the Survivor is freed to see finally "the one person I had been looking for all this time" (182). Experiencing

the beauty of that luminous symbol of her innermost self, she is also offered a guide into a new way of seeing and relating to the world. Able to acknowledge fully and attune herself to the spark of the divine within her, the Survivor is able to perceive the ground of being, the divine spark, everywhere in the world. She is able to see what Sufi writer Vaughan-Lee calls “the secret face of creation,” which allows her “to see through the veils of illusion and glimpse the real beauty that lies behind” (Vaughan-Lee 134–35). Thus the Survivor reaches the state of inner attunement where she sees the face of God everywhere—what Ibn ‘Arabi calls “the self-disclosure of God.”²⁸

In this framework Levinas’s dictum of the moral imperative of the face of the other becomes a consequence of the moral imperative to respond to the face (attributes) of God as reflected in the faces of all other human beings. But the Survivor goes beyond that. Since some of the attributes of God are reflected in *all* beings, the luminous face also awakens the Survivor to the beauty of the natural world as well, symbolized by the transformation of Hugo, Emily’s dog-cat, who now appears as “a splendid animal, handsome, all kindly dignity and command” (213). The Survivor’s ability to see and follow the luminous face of her own and her creator’s wisdom makes manifest for her “another order of world altogether” in which not only is Hugo transformed but Emily, too, is “transmuted, and in another key” (213). In this transformed world the energy of the stunted, deprived cannibal children can also be accommodated and transmuted. Lessing’s dream memoir provides the reader with both a key to her transformed vision and a call to follow her into that other way of seeing.

Shikasta: Collective Spiritual Adventuring

If *Memoirs* is a fictional autobiographical account of Lessing’s spiritual transformation following an initial moment of inspiration, then *Shikasta* is the product of her sustained mature spiritual vision. Having portrayed in *Memoirs* the process whereby her alter ego, the Survivor, becomes capable of recognizing and attuning herself to the transcendent element within, the luminous face, five years later in *Shikasta* Lessing portrays the process by which an entire civilization is enabled to attune itself to the transcendent element through recognizing and obeying a prophetic figure. However, in this monumental work Lessing goes a step further and reveals the ongoing process by which transcendental

knowledge has been revealed from prehistory to contemporary times. She does this through her use of the metaphor of different worlds to explain varying levels of spiritual capacity or attunement. Shikasta is an estranged, defamiliarized version of earth. Shikastans know nothing of other individuals on other stars and are mostly out of touch with both their innermost being and the spiritual forces operative in the cosmos. Canopus, the most evolved star in the galaxy, corresponds to the realm occupied by those in continual touch with their innermost being and thus with the will of the divine, here called the Necessity. Shammat, the rogue planet of the star Puttiora, an outlaw even in terms of Puttiora's low level of development, corresponds to the realm of those who are totally out of touch with the Necessity, who have focused all the power of their souls on greed and exploitation of others.

In an interview Lessing explicitly identifies the source for her vision in *Shikasta* with her reading through the sacred books of the Middle East one after another. Thus she notes that *Shikasta* is "a very regurgitated book because it all comes out of the sacred books" ("A Conversation" 23). She further comments that all the great religions of the Middle East "are the same religion, they just developed differently" (23). Thus the Canopeans seem to be closely associated with the prophets and spiritual teachers of various sacred scriptures, and the planet Shikasta with the domain of the earthly world. Shammat seems to be the domain of the biblical devils and tempters. Both Shammat and Canopus send envoys to influence the Shikastans. Thus Shikastans, representing the world of "fallen" humanity, can be influenced to develop the capacities of their higher or lower selves, depending on which otherworldly influences they respond to. Furthermore, as in the Old Testament, Shikasta has a paradisiacal past, when it was called Rohanda and closely connected to Canopus (and thus the divine).

With all of humankind's biblical and secular history at her disposal, Lessing can dare to let the imaginative symbols for spiritual communion and growth she used in *Memoirs* expand and flourish in *Shikasta*. To begin with, *Shikasta* refigures the Survivor's movement between her inner and outer worlds, a movement that I associate with the contraction and expansion of the heart. In *Shikasta* this becomes the movement of the narrative between two realms—an outer-space narrative, told from the perspective of Canopus, which frames the whole novel and dominates the first half, and an inner-space narrative, seen mainly through the eyes of the Shikastans, that predominates in the second half of the work.²⁹ Thus we begin seeing Shikasta from above, from the

perspective of the infinitely more spiritually advanced Canopeans. This view of Shikasta introduces us to the spiritual principles at work in the novel's cosmos. An understanding of these principles colors our perception of the earthlike planet. Thus, rather than assuming that humans are basically self-serving and prone to violence, the view of what Frager calls the lower self, Canopeans believe that Shikastans' true reality is one of cooperation, unity with the cosmos, and selfless love. Canopeans themselves embody these qualities in their service to Shikasta, choosing to aid its evolution at the cost of great personal pain and difficulty. Indeed, the Canopean envoy Johor begins his narration concerning his three trips to Shikasta (couched as a report to Canopean administrators) by stating that one of his reasons for including the various documents he compiles about Shikasta in his reports is to demonstrate that Shikasta "is worth so much of our time and trouble" (13).³⁰

Just as the Survivor's new understandings in the inner and outer worlds of *Memoirs* feed each other (the detachment the Survivor gains from her observations of Emily in the outer world feeds her attachment to the luminous face encountered in the inner world), so, too, we gradually see that both narrative frames of *Shikasta* influence each other. We slowly become aware that through their interaction Johor, in the outer frame, and various Shikastans, in the inner frame, are aided in their struggle to acquire detachment from lower levels of self and to progress in their attraction to, and understanding of, the divine realm. We will explore this interaction further below.

However, *Shikasta* takes the theme of spiritual progression found in *Memoirs* a step further. On both Canopus and Shikasta, spiritual progress (after acknowledging the divine realm) is tied to *service* to the divine realm (the step after recognition of the divine), which inevitably involves withstanding tests to one's commitment and difficulties that bar the way to service and understanding. We will see that both Johor, the Canopean envoy to Shikasta through whose eyes we see most of the outer frame of the first half of the novel, and Rachel Sherban, the young Shikastan teenager through whose diary account we see much of the inner-space frame of the second half, each struggle against the forces within and without that act as barriers to their understanding of, and service to, the divine.

This theme of recognition and service to the divine realm is partly veiled by the complex retrospective narrative framing of the novel. While *Memoirs* provided a retrospective account of an older woman's spiritual transformation, *Shikasta* is framed by the retrospective voice

of Johor, the timeless male/female emissary from the star Canopus. His reports back to Canopus on the situation he encounters on the planet Shikasta during his three visits recount Johor's own spiritual journey from despair over Shikastan limitations and suffering to detachment and a new appreciation of Shikasta's long, painful road to spiritual growth. Johor's long look back at human prehistory and history, an agonized description of the loss of primordial connectedness to the source of all good, seems to be the mature Lessing's explanation of the ways of God to humankind. Now at the height of her visionary power, Lessing is able to transmute the pain of her personal history (as seen in her conventional autobiographies and her autobiographical fictions) into humanity's agonized efforts to mature spiritually.³¹ The challenges of the human condition are now seen to involve inevitably the loss of a sense of unexamined paradisiacal connectedness with an external source of well-being. The suffering and hardship that ensue are part of the means to spiritual growth.

Shikasta's prolonged and profound investigation of the relationship between hardship and spiritual growth marks how far Lessing has come from the earlier novel. In *Memoirs* this theme is portrayed in a highly abstract way as the necessary struggle between constructive and destructive forces encountered by the Survivor behind the wall. On the realistic side of the wall the theme is symbolically conveyed in the survivor's interaction with the cannibal children. In *Shikasta* this theme is now presented as the result of the necessary interaction between beings at very different levels of spiritual understanding. In both narrative frames it is this interaction that fuels the painful process of spiritual growth.

Johor's Outer-Space Narrative

For Johor in the outer-space frame the path to new awareness involves not only his interaction with Shikasta but also his new awareness of the role that both Canopus and Shammatt play in Shikasta's history. One of Johor's first insights as he begins his retrospective reporting on his third visit to Shikasta is the realization that Canopus bears some responsibility for the extreme nature of Shikasta's suffering after its fall from the paradisiacal state of Rohanda. This fall, he explains, is due to an unforeseen and unavoidable accident of the stars that severely cuts down the spiritual energy from Canopus that feeds the Shikastan

reality (35–37). However, the Shikastans' spiritual deprivation is also vastly increased by the intervention of Shammata that siphons off most of the spiritual energy left to the Shikastans, drastically worsening their situation. Furthermore, Johor explains that Canopus had not fully prepared the Shikastans for dealing with difficulties, thus making them even more vulnerable in the face of Shammatan exploitation (35–36). Johor can now admit that “on none of our other colonies have we again been satisfied with an easy triumphant growth. We have always inbuilt a certain amount of stress, of danger” (36–37). Thus Johor begins to understand both the importance of experiences of hardship in a people's development and the need to take into account those with “very different types of mind, feeding on different fuel” (36).³²

The retrospective framing of Johor's reports also allows us to watch the process by which he grows spiritually as he observes Shikasta's apparent devolution. Thus we see Johor's own spiritual growth through his changed understanding of Shikasta suffering and evolution. Johor begins his reports with his reflections as he embarks on his third visit to Shikasta at a time of crisis in its late twentieth century shortly before it experiences its Third World War. Acknowledging his feeling of “dismay” as he contemplates the Shikasta experience of the “slow leaking away of [spiritual] substance through millennia—and with such a lowly glimmering of light at the end of it all” (13), Johor immediately emphasizes the retrospective nature of his reports. He explains that he is “deliberately reviving memories, re-creating memories” (14) of his earlier two visits, especially that of his first—“the worst” experience he has ever had as an envoy. Johor's disturbing memories of his first visit center on the catastrophic time of Shikasta's fall. Deprived of all but the faintest trickle of spiritual emanations from Canopus, Shikasta, under Johor's horrified gaze, moves overnight from a paradisiacal garden to an ugly, weed-infested desert. The peaceful, spiritually attuned early civilization becomes a collection of barbaric tribal groupings made up of frantic individuals, out of touch with themselves, each other, the natural world, and Canopus.

Johor's memories of both his first two visits are filled with his painful response to Shikasta suffering, such as having to tell the indigenous peoples that “they would become less than shadows of their former selves” (68). He reflects at the beginning of his third visit that “I have scarcely thought of [Shikasta] between that [first] time and this. I did not want to. To dwell on unavoidable wrong—no, it does no good” (14). After his second visit (when he has to help destroy irredeemably

corrupt Shikastan cities), he retreats into what Dominick LaCapra in his work on historical accounts of trauma calls “objectification” to deal with his pain (99): “I kept my thoughts well within the limits of my task” (14).³³

The tone of Johor’s report at the beginning of his third visit, in the Shikastans’ late twentieth century, while expressing “dismay,” also suggests a spark of new understanding of “the stubborn patience needed [by the Shikastans] to withstand [spiritual] attrition” (13). As Johor steps back from his own expectations and very different understanding of the universe and begins to open himself up to how Shikastans perceive their reality, he becomes capable of a new kind of empathetic understanding of their plight. This new understanding requires a new form of reporting (LaCapra 103–4). Thus Johor begins to reflect consciously on “the problems of reporting adequately” (196).³⁴ Aware that his “notes were being read by minds very far from the Shikastan situation,” Johor “devised certain additional material, to supplement [his] reports” (196). Through the inclusion of “sketches” and stories of various kinds of Shikastans (for example, showing both colonialists and indigenous peoples as victims), as well as additional explanatory information that was not requested, Johor tries to capture the reality of the Shikastan situation for Canopeans with very different “expectations and imaginings of Shikasta” (196). In these reports we see Johor learning to understand and convey a new respect for Shikastan dignity in the face of suffering and to recognize the kind of strength out of which it grows.

In his last special report Johor describes a man and a woman looking at a perfect “golden chestnut leaf in autumn” (255): she takes solace in the understanding that “the laws that made this shape must be, must be [*sic*] stronger in the end than the slow distorters and perverters of the substance of life” (256). He glances out the window at the tree that produced this leaf and sees not just the “ordinary tree-in-autumn” or “the seethe and scramble and eating” that is truth of its biological being but another tree—“a fine, high, shimmering light, like shaped sunlight” (256)—the tree’s underlying spiritual reality that feeds the tree’s essence. Just as the Survivor after her transformation sees the world irradiated by the light of the face of God, so a few Shikastans, driven beyond their usual limitations, are able to see the spiritual reality that lies hidden within phenomenal reality.³⁵ Johor is thus able to conclude his special report with an acknowledgment that Shikastans, although “infinitely damaged, reduced and dwindled

from their origins,” are “reaching out with their minds to heights of courage and . . . I am putting the word *faith* here. After thought. With caution. With an exact and hopeful respect” (257). Here we see the fruit of Johor’s detachment or, put another way, of his new ability to experience what LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement” (102). Rather than being overwhelmed by pain at identification with Shikasta’s loss of spiritual attunement, Johor is able to distance himself enough to appreciate both their pain and their courage in coping.

We do not fully appreciate how much Johor has evolved in his understanding of, and respect for, Shikasta detachment and courage until we see the fruits of his inner growth in his behavior when he is born into Shikasta reality in the second half of the novel. As George Sherban, with no direct memory of his Canopean past, he is able to withstand the powerful egotistical, divisive pressures of Shikasta, to detach himself from the rampant pain and misery surrounding him, and to attune himself to the unifying forces associated with Canopus. His openness to Canopean influence is suggested by his attraction to the stars as a child, his willing acceptance of the special education he receives from a series of unique Canopean visitors, and his ability as a teenager to represent disparate races and contending groups. Thus from the beginning George is able to grasp and model the forces of unity, cooperation, and selfless love (the forces of Canopus) in Shikasta reality and to make these constructive forces available to those around him. He is eventually able, through the power of his words, to assist a representative group of responsive Shikastans to attune themselves to the unifying forces of Canopus and to survive their Third World War. In short, Lessing frames her portrayal of a spiritual prophet capable of saving the planet Shikasta from complete destruction in terms of the retrospective growth in detachment and empathic unsettlement of the Canopean envoy Johor (incarnated as George Sherban) and his ability to bring his new understanding into service during his immersion in Shikasta reality.

George’s words, the manifestation of his Canopean power on Shikasta, bring up another way in which Lessing reconfigures symbols from *Memoirs* in this later work. While *Memoirs* uses the image of the luminous face as the symbol of the call from deep within (and without) that initiates the Survivor’s spiritual journey, in *Shikasta* it is the symbol of words that awakens the Shikastans from their spiritual sleep, their embeddedness in the world of the lower self, and calls them to begin their journey of recognition, service, and steadfastness. Here

Lessing seems to be explicitly drawing on the understandings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that God is revealed to humanity through the words (and persons) of prophetic or divine figures as recorded in the scriptures of the three faiths. In *Shikasta* we will see that the ability of George Sherban, the incarnation of Johor in Shikastan reality, to influence Shikastans resides primarily in the power of his words. His words have the capacity to awaken their minds, educate their hearts, and motivate their wills to serve him (and thus Canopus).

The Shikastans' Inner-Space Narrative

The pattern of the retrospective spiritual journey that structures both *Memoirs* and the outer-space frame of Johor's narrative is also found in the inner-space narrative of the second half of *Shikasta*, concentrating on the spiritual struggles of George's sister, Rachel Sherban, and other Shikastans. But again this theme of the spiritual journey takes on a new life in Shikastan reality. Unlike the ever-deepening journey to the center of the soul found in *Memoirs*, or the slow accumulation of respect and detachment for the Shikastans that characterizes Johor's spiritual journey, when we enter Shikastan reality in the second half of the novel, we find ourselves on the emotional roller coaster of teenaged Rachel Sherban's inner world. Through her diary account, we experience first hand the pain, fear, and, above all, confusion that reigns on Shikasta. By using as her primary focal point a narrator whose spiritual understanding is limited, Lessing forces her readers to experience and identify with Rachel's difficulties and the immense effort required to gain spiritual perspective while on Shikasta. When Rachel dies without realizing her spiritual potential, readers are forced to reassess the obstacles that hindered her spiritual development and undergo their own empathic unsettlement. Thus the narrative structure of the book contributes to the reader's experience of its meaning.³⁶ Eventually we become aware of the transformation in others around Rachel, mainly family members and friends, through their interaction with George. These foil characters clearly demonstrate the need to withstand difficulties (especially the pull of Shammat or the lower self) in the path of service to George (whose words carry the spark of the divine) and help clarify the kinds of strengths that steadfastness develops. But these understandings emerge most clearly through other narrative documents after Rachel herself has died.

Much of the second half of *Shikasta* concentrates on Rachel Sherban's retrospective insights as she begins the process of keeping a diary in order to help her understand the unique spiritual qualities of her brother George. Rachel's account of why she decides to keep a diary is the first time we get a clear portrayal of the power of words on Shikasta. It is the words of Hasan (presumably another envoy from Canopus), one of the special individuals who comes to help educate George, that first awaken Rachel's soul. Hearing Hasan speak to George, she suddenly grasps that beneath the simple surface of his words there is another layer of meaning that George can hear and that she cannot: "I could see from George's face that in quite ordinary things that were said was much much more. I just couldn't grasp it" (283–84). Like the ability to see the shimmering tree behind the ordinary tree, Shikastans can only hear the deeper layer of meaning in Hasan's (or later George's) words if they are ready. Because Rachel has suddenly grasped that there is a deeper meaning in Hasan's words, Hasan suggests that she keep a diary in which she should "write an account of [her] . . . childhood" (284). So Rachel's retrospective diary keeping is presented as Hasan's encouragement of Rachel's spiritual growth.

This diary keeping begins when Rachel is only fourteen. Thus Rachel is a much younger retrospective heroine than her counterpart in *Memoirs* and, of course, than Johor in the first half of the book. Representing an interesting recasting by Lessing of the role of a young girl, Rachel is both similar to and different from Lessing's earlier young heroines. Like the young Martha Quest, Rachel is filled with emotions she does not understand; she is even more sensitive than Emily to the suffering of others; and she is crippled with a dangerous self-pity that Lessing describes in *Under My Skin* as "a real enemy," the weeping child within who "transmogrifies into a thousand self-pitying monsters" (21). Like these earlier protagonists, Rachel also struggles to understand the meaning of her situation, in her case through the keeping of her diary. Unlike those earlier heroines, however, Rachel does not have to struggle as a young girl with a critical, inhibited mother or a father whose childhood tickling leaves her with nightmares for years. Nor is she damaged by the birth of a younger brother who usurps her mother's love. Moreover, her retrospective insights heighten her self-awareness. Thus Rachel is one of the most fortunate of Lessing's young heroines in terms of a highly supportive family and many personal advantages: she is attractive, intelligent, and perceptive. She

is, however, faced with a horrific world, a grimly realistic depiction of the devolution encountered by Emily in *Memoirs*. Not burdened by parental rejection, Rachel does not need to throw herself into this difficult world to offset a lack of parental acceptance or use her sexuality to rebel against her parents; rather, Rachel fears adult experiences and responsibilities and turns away from them back to the security of childhood and the protection of home. Thus it is her fear of involvement in the threatening world rather than her dangerous embrace of experience that limits her.

What is most interesting about this portrayal of female coming of age in a difficult period is that this time Lessing places her young protagonist in the context of a spiritually coherent universe. Influenced by our exposure to Johor's reports and to Canopean values in the first half of the novel, we see Rachel, and indeed all Shikastans, both from their own perspective and, simultaneously, from the Canopean perspective.³⁷ Holding in mind both perspectives, we are prevented from overidentifying with Rachel's despair and the horrors of her world. We empathize with her struggles to understand the nature of George's unique being and the meaning of the pain and suffering surrounding her, but at the same time we feel a certain detachment from them. As Gayle Greene points out, we have already encountered Rachel in the first half of *Shikasta* (167), having been introduced to her soul-self, Rilla, a representation of immortal aspects of her identity, on Zone Six. This "twilight" realm of grief and regret is where Shikasta souls go after death if they have not withstood the temptations of Shikasta—the tendency to fall into "self-indulgence and weakness" and "forgetfulness" (21). The only way out of Zone Six's enervating atmosphere is for the souls to submit to being reborn into Shikasta and to try again to keep alive some remnant of knowledge of their "purpose and will" (20) in order to earn their way out of that terrible place. Rilla, like others on Zone Six, has failed this test many times, perhaps because she has developed mainly the capacities of what Frager calls the personal soul—the realm of intelligence and the ego (106–7)—but not the deeper facets of the soul connected to the heart and faith. Thus we see her despair (22) and are warned by Johor of her "locked violences" (23)—the tensions presumably arising when mind, heart, and will are at odds with one another.³⁸ We do not really understand the significance of this inner tension until we see that on Shikasta Rachel's sympathy for her poor Moroccan neighbors and attraction to George are undermined by the forces of what Frager calls "the negative ego"

(107), in this case her fear, self-pity, and adolescent egotism. For example, when she learns of the death of her Moroccan friends, rather than being motivated to help at the children's camps (and indirectly help the Moroccan couple's children), she comments, "I wish I was dead with Naseem and Shireen" (335). Over and over Rachel is told by both George and her parents to "toughen . . . up" (331), but she seems unable or unwilling to relinquish her idea of herself as too sensitive to deal with the devolving world that she faces. While Rachel grows in her understanding of George, herself, and her family, she is not able finally to detach herself enough from the negative forces blocking her and to fully respond to George's guidance. Thus she does not play the role that is potentially hers.

Rachel's failure to mature spiritually is connected to her failure to respond adequately to George's guidance. Although her retrospective diary keeping enables her to realize something of George's unique presence, she still allows her own fears and self-obsessions to interfere with her response to him. Twice Rachel is asked by George to stretch her idea of her own capabilities—or, put differently, to detach herself from her fears and weaknesses—and to play her assigned role, which involves assuming responsibility for others less fortunate than herself. The first time, when she is just eighteen, George asks her to help Benjamin with the children's camps, taking over the running of the girls' camp, a huge makeshift orphanage and school designed to accommodate the fifty thousand Tunisian girl children orphaned by the continual wars of late twentieth-century Shikasta. George had already pointed out to Rachel how unusually well educated she is for these difficult times (her parents are British-born professionals serving as aid workers first in Morocco and then in Tunisia, and they have seen to it that Rachel received a highly unconventional but broad education). Rachel, however, cannot imagine herself dealing with such a catastrophic situation and says no (341). After Rachel refuses to take over the girls' camp, George asks her to take over the education and upbringing of two orphaned children, Kassim and Leila, who come from a family like Rachel's and would be better off not in the camps. Rachel agrees, but this caretaking becomes more difficult when George tells Rachel that he and Benjamin (his twin brother) are about to leave on an extended trip. He carefully instructs Rachel to stay with the children in the flat while he is away: "I don't want you to leave here. I want you to remember that I said this" (345). Hearing these words, Rachel immediately recognizes their power, but she

cannot deal with the implicit demand they make on her to stand firm in the face of difficulties: “When I heard what he said, I was engulfed in sickness. A blackness. . . . I felt that I should be absorbing something and I wasn’t” (345). Thus we are not surprised when, after receiving word from someone that George is scheduled to be killed by the ruling elite, Rachel rushes to try to warn him. She does this despite his earlier instructions and despite the insistence of Suzannah, George’s girlfriend, that George would not want her to go looking for him. Disregarding both pleas and responsibilities, she gives in to a powerful whirlpool-type force that sucks her in. Associated with the power of Shammat, this whirlpool force was earlier seen on Zone Six, where it almost swallowed up Rilla and Ben (189–92). Here on Shikasta, the whirlpool force has been internalized and represents the pull of the lower ego, which doubts and rationalizes the instructions of George.³⁹ Rushing off to warn George, Rachel is eventually arrested and commits suicide. Her death is both needless and unhelpful. It confuses George’s followers (she was impersonating George at the time of her arrest) who now believe he can appear in two places at once. Further, it was not necessary to warn George that his life is in danger, as we later learn that he has survived nine attempts to kill him (363).⁴⁰

In portraying Rachel, despite her ideal family conditions, as ultimately lacking in the detachment and emotional toughness needed to survive and grow in her difficult world, Lessing seems to be reassessing the value of her own difficult early years and of the strength that can come out of personal or family difficulties. It is Lessing’s mature acceptance of suffering and difficulties as built into the structure of the universe as the means to spiritual growth that characterizes her portrayal of both Johor and Rachel. Both struggle to understand the terrible experiences to which they are exposed. But Johor is given countless millennia to gradually comprehend the pattern at work in Shikasta evolution, while Rachel is only given a few years. However, her failure is not presented as absolute. Her soul will presumably go back to Zone Six, where she will be given another chance to enter into Shikasta reality and deal with its challenges. Furthermore, Lessing frames her portrayal of Rachel’s surrender to Shammat (the negative ego) with the more positive struggles of her difficult older brother Benjamin (George’s twin).⁴¹

Far less perceptive than Rachel as a child and teenager, Benjamin is particularly disadvantaged as George’s nonidentical twin brother. Inevitably compared to and unable to keep up with his exceptional

brother, Ben compensates by using the persona and “style” of the cynic to cover his insecurity, always finding things “boring” (275). Through Rachel’s eyes, we see Ben’s gradual change as he begins to follow George’s guidance, first involving himself in the youth organizations and then taking on the leadership of the children’s camps. Visiting him at the boys’ camp, Rachel is surprised at how much people like and respect him. She also sees that he is very good at what he does—“very efficient . . . keep[ing] everything working properly” (337). Through assuming this large responsibility, he acquires both confidence and competence. Service enables Ben to begin to fulfill his potential.

From the paradigm hinted at in *Memoirs* and then more boldly developed in the first part of *Shikasta*, we might suspect that in order for Ben to access deeper levels of the self, he will be faced with difficulties. Ben’s big test comes when he is groomed for a position of authority by the new Chinese administration in an effort to co-opt his influence as the leader of the children’s camps. Through a letter back to George from the midst of the Chinese “friendship tutorial” to which he has been invited, we see the strengthened clarity and understanding of Ben’s thinking as he describes how he and three other followers of George create through their words an atmosphere of unity that the Chinese cannot destroy. It is an atmosphere that is characterized as “*clear and cool*” (366, emphasis in original), where the delegates’ perfectly acceptable words could be interpreted on an entirely different level. We recognize the unity-creating power of these words as attunement with the power of George’s words (with Canopus). Eventually, Ben writes, even this “transparent” talk would stop and silence would reign—“No need to say a word” (367). Ben is also detached enough to describe how an unplanned visitor (presumably an emissary from Shammat) is able to destroy that unity (368). Nonetheless, Ben does not fall victim to Chinese manipulation and is presumably strengthened by the whole experience (we get insights into Ben’s character development from later letters of a Chinese administrator [375, 377]). We see the culmination of Ben’s new spiritual powers when he is able to assist George at a climactic trial of the white race—bringing with him the assistance of the junior youth whom he represents. They play an important role in the successful staging of this trial that saves the white race from being massacred by disaffected third-world youth. Following his invaluable service, Ben seems to have fulfilled his destiny; we later presume that Ben is dead when we learn that George’s second child is named after him (445).

If Lessing's depiction of Benjamin offers a clear alternative to Rachel's fate and reveals Lessing's mature understanding of the role that service to the divine guide plays in acquiring detachment and the necessary overcoming of hardships that it involves, her portrayal of older characters in the second half of *Shikasta* also shows the fruits of this new understanding. Rachel's mother and father, Olga and Simon, are highly atypical Lessing fictional parents. Unlike the obtuse, self-involved mother and neurotic, damaged father of Martha Quest in the *Children of Violence* series, of Emily in *Memoirs*, and of Lessing in the autobiographies, Olga and Simon are ideal parents, open and responsive to the needs of all three of their children. We see in the first half of *Shikasta* how they are chosen by Johor as suitable parents for George Sherban and his siblings, in part because of their "many useful capacities," including energy, good education, and "lack of regional bias." They are also "healthy, well balanced, [and] likely to be responsible parents" (258). We see these qualities in action in the second half of *Shikasta*. Olga's caring, wise responses to Rachel's teenaged angst are the antithesis of earlier, tension-filled mother-daughter interactions in Lessing's work. Above all, Simon and Olga's ability to accept the gift of George's presence without fully understanding it defines what is unique about them. As Simon explains to Rachel, "being George's parents we had to see things differently" (316). Their ability to see things differently, to recognize George's special status, allows them to fulfill their potential as parents of a prophetic figure while getting on with their own work of selflessly saving the lives of others.

In her portrait of Olga and Simon, Lessing provides us with a cameo of life lived as a spiritual adventure. Its defining feature is not so much professional success as openness to the divine guide in the person of their son George and service (to their families, to others, to the special reality that is George's). Their willingness to include their children in their professional lives, exposing them to many of the hardships they themselves undergo, their ability to really listen to and talk to them, even when they are busy and tired, their openness to the special status of George, and finally their dedication to the well-being of others less fortunate than themselves defines the quality of their lives. Death does not seem to end this adventure, as suggested by Rachel's response when Olga dies: "I did not feel any grief because it did not seem to be indicated. Anyway, I don't believe in death" (347).

I mentioned above the paradigm of overcoming difficulties on the path to developing characteristics of the deeper self. We see this fully

portrayed in a most unlikely representative of spiritual growth, service, and the acquisition of detachment: Lynda Coldridge, a schizophrenic who has spent most of her life in mental hospitals. As a young girl her ability to hear voices was diagnosed as pathogenic, and the harsh treatment she received over the years due to her voices has led to bouts of mental illness when she is out of touch with her own spirit, even her surface identity. Despite all these difficulties, beneath her loss of self-esteem and outward degradation, she has maintained her trust in the authenticity of her experiences. When she is finally befriended by Dr. Hebert, a sympathetic psychiatrist, she is able to use her capacities constructively, teaching him to acquire some of her ability and eventually tuning in to the voice of George. Lynda's integrity in the face of lifelong oppression from the outside world and, at times, mental breakdown gives her a tremendous inner strength and detachment that allows her to be an inspiration to Dr. Hebert and utterly steadfast and reliable in her service to George. As with other characters, it is this quality of attraction and service to George that fosters her inner development. Although she foresees the catastrophic war to come, she does not succumb to fear but calmly plays her role as the dispatcher of useful telepathic people to safe places chosen by George. Her selflessness and dedication allow Lynda to remain detached from her own approaching death and to trust fully in her deepest self, her voices, especially the voice of George.⁴²

When the inevitable Shikastan Third World War does come, the tension between constructive and destructive forces that has dominated Shikasta's history is played out again, this time with the emphasis on the positive—the birth of a new civilization. Those Shikastans sufficiently attracted to George (and their deeper selves) to follow his guidance survive, and, despite initial terrible crises and catastrophes, a new world starts to emerge. With their numbers greatly reduced, Shikastans now receive sufficient spiritual energy from Canopus to thrive again. As the various edenic cities spring up once more, shaped in the forms of the old ideal cities before the fall out of alignment, Shikastans are able again to perceive and live lives attuned to the spiritual emanations of Canopus. Hence the symbolic new world experienced by the Survivor at the end of her account of her spiritual journey is here made available to the many and manifested in the phenomenal world. This is the gift of Lessing's mature vision, the fruit of her retrospective meditation on first her personal past and then our collective mythic past.

Conclusion: Lessing's Spiritual Maturity

The cycle of spiritual development begun in *Memoirs* as a symbolic inner movement of attraction and detachment experienced by the author's alter ego is externalized in *Shikasta* into a fuller cycle that includes active service in the world to the spiritual realm embodied in the prophet George Sherban, followed by inevitable hardship and the need for steadfastness. Overcoming the difficulties encountered on the path of service strengthens the progress on the spiritual journey. This cycle, which involves the engagement of the heart, mind, and will, is enacted on various levels and extended to all those who respond to spiritual guidance. This more concrete portrayal of spiritual growth in very different kinds of people is the product of Lessing's mature retrospective spiritual reflection and growth. Furthermore, the portrayal of Johor's slow, painful development to a level of detachment that sustains him as he immerses himself in Shikasta's limited, painful reality and enables him to awaken and save a representative group of Shikastans seems to reflect Lessing's own growth in wisdom and mature spiritual vision since her writing of *Memoirs*. In effect, in *Shikasta* she answers the question of where the Survivor goes after her transformation at the end of *Memoirs*. Lessing, having portrayed her own spiritual evolution in the autobiographical *Memoirs*, becomes capable of tackling the presentation of humanity's spiritual evolution in *Shikasta*. The maturation of the Survivor's transformed understanding opens the door to Lessing's depiction of Johor, the envoy who feels compelled by his position as a member of the Canopean Colonial Service, that is, by his attunement to the power of spiritual "Love," to use his awareness to reach out to Shikastans despite the pain it causes him (13). Lessing, also, like her far-seeing narrator, seems compelled, despite loss of popularity and critical misunderstandings, to use her growing awareness of humankind's spiritual potential to attempt to reach out to those who are less aware. In *Shikasta*, as Lessing moves from the mature, distanced, mythic perspective of Johor in the first half of the novel to the immersion in the immediate, painful realities and limitations of Rachel's perspective in the second half, she reaches out not only to her confused youth and earlier young narrators but also to all of us, offering us the benefit of her mature vision. Her sympathetic but detached portrait of Rachel's doubts, fears, and confusion suggests Lessing's compassion for readers who identify with Rachel's complex weaknesses. Unable to deal with or see beyond the painful

reality around her or to trust the full implications of her awareness of George's spiritual authority, Rachel falls victim to a lack of both detachment from the ego and attraction to the divine.

Notes

1. Lessing uses the term "space fiction" in "Some Remarks" at the beginning of *Shikasta*. She uses the term "inner-space fiction" in the prefatory materials for *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971).

2. See *Aging and Gender in Literature*, edited by Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, for other examples of midlife creativity. In particular, look at chapter 2, "Another Model of the Aging Writer: Sartre's Politics of Old Age," in which Wyatt-Brown offers three different models for late lifestyle changes. Lessing's midlife change seems to fit the second trajectory, that of writers "liberated by the possibility of radical change" (52).

3. This statement is a recasting of Lessing's famous comment that "I always write about the individual and that which surrounds him" (Bigsby 1) to specifically include the spiritual domain. See my article "Sufism, Jung and the Myth of Kore," which begins with another recasting of that statement, again to include the spiritual (99).

4. I wish to thank my friend Mark Keedwell for assisting me in understanding Sufi thought and doctrine. His insight and perceptiveness both in personal communication and as the leader of a Sufi study group that I have been fortunate enough to participate in have been an invaluable assistance.

5. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), whose name means "the glory of God," declared in 1863 that he was the latest in an ongoing series of Manifestations of God sent to educate and spiritualize humankind. Lessing herself has no knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh's writings (personal letter to the author). However, they provide a powerful explanatory tool for understanding levels of detachment and spiritual attunement and for analyzing characters' movement along a spiritual trajectory. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh often reinterprets or extends Sufi symbols (see Saiedi 17–110).

6. Sherry Salman explains Jung's theory of individuation as involving "the differentiation and creative assimilation of psychic opposites, of the shadow and other unconscious material. Its yield is the wisdom of the wholeness of life, and 'amor fati': acceptance and love of one's fate" (68).

7. I borrow this tripartite division of the faculties of the soul from Bahá'í psychiatrist H. B. Danesh's work *The Psychology of Spirituality*, where he describes knowledge, love, and will as three capacities of the soul (49–50).

8. The first three dimensions of the soul, consisting of the mineral, vegetable, and animal soul, have evolved through the earlier forms of life and continue to be an important part of individual well-being. Intimately connecting the human being with all other life forms, they identify the capacities of cohesion (found in minerals), growth (found in plants), and movement and the passions (found in animals). The fourth dimension, the "personal soul," "is located in the brain and is related to the nervous system" (106). As the seat of human

intelligence and the source of our psychological nature, it is the aspect of the soul with which we are most familiar (Frager 4). The next three dimensions represent purely spiritual capacities, which, like concentric circles, move toward the core of the soul, wherein resides the spark of the divine within us (Frager 108–9).

9. Ibn ‘Arabi describes numerous spiritual meetings with Khidr, who is called his “hidden spiritual master” (Corbin 32).

10. See “Sufism, Jung and the Myth of Kore” where I discuss *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* in terms of Jung’s discussion of rebirth and argue that the Providers are a personification of the Self (106–8).

11. Fahim interprets the “she”—“the presence of the impersonal rooms”—in ways that are both similar to and different from my interpretation of the luminous face. Fahim also sees her “not as a separate deity” but as “the crucial mediator of different levels of perception which is the focus of the novel” (101). Fahim goes on to argue that the narrator “integrates higher levels of understanding by concentrating on” three mandala symbols: the carpet, the “multilayered garden,” and the final egg episode (101).

12. This definition of spiritual search agrees with Sufi values as explained by Frager, who stresses that the Sufi tradition teaches the use of one’s experiences in the world as part of the spiritual path and mentions service to others as one of the paths to God (Frager 12–13).

13. While Ibn ‘Arabi bases his writings and practice on “the Islamic intellectual tradition” (Chittick, *Self-Disclosure* xi), he writes of being personally awakened by experiencing a voice calling him away from the indulgences of his life as the son of a wealthy nobleman (Addas 36). Later, however, he experienced visions of various Messengers of God speaking to him, including Mohammed and Jesus (ibid. 199). He also describes numerous meetings in the spiritual world with the spiritual guide Khidr. The Sufi mystic Rumi was awakened by a particular individual, the “wandering dervish, Shams of Tabriz” (xi). The contemporary Sufi teacher Idries Shah, who was Lessing’s mentor, writes at length of the importance of the teacher (34, 54, 128–30).

14. Ken Wilber notes that “the self at virtually any stage of development can have various types of peak experiences . . . including [those] . . . of the transpersonal realms. . . . But . . . these temporary states still need to be converted into enduring traits if development into these realms is to become permanent” (182–83). He also describes the kinds of impediments to psychic growth that can occur at each stage in the psychospiritual life journey (see *A Brief History of Everything*, ch. 9–13).

15. Fahim connects Hugo with the narrator’s “animal nature,” which needs to be incorporated into her psyche (107). She also associates him with “reconciliation with the psychological level” as he was present during the narrator’s “descent in the last episode of the ‘personal rooms’” (121).

16. According to Frager, the animal soul is located in the heart and through the circulation of the blood allows for the ease of movement of animals. “The animal soul [also] includes our fears, angers, and passions” (103).

17. See “Journeys of the Spirit: The Older Woman in Doris Lessing’s Work,” where I interpret some of Emily’s experiences in terms of decisions made by the youthful Lessing.

18. Shadia Fahim, Debrah Raschke, and Roberta Rubenstein all connect the six-sided room with a mandala symbol, which Fahim emphasizes involves “the reconciliation of opposites and the balancing of levels of perception” (101).

19. Shadia Fahim also makes this point (100).

20. Shah writes that “unless the individual has learned to locate and allow for the various patterns of coercive institutions, formal and also informal, which rule him,” he will not be free to deal with others or reform society (frontispiece of *Walking in the Shade*).

21. Jeanie Warnock discusses the “sadistic tickling” of Emily by her father (15) and relates it to the narrator’s (and Lessing’s) attempt “to re-write her current self-narrative and find inner potentialities still waiting to be realized consciously” (12) in her article “Unlocking the Prison of the Past: Childhood Trauma and Narrative in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*.”

22. Fahim connects this dialect of opposites to the novel’s use of mandala imagery, which she identifies as symbolizing the process of balancing different modes of perception (101). In my article on Sufi and Jungian influences in *Marriages*, I also discuss Lessing’s “response to the emphasis in Sufi teachings on the need to embrace seemingly contradictory or disparate aspects of experience” (“Sufism” 100).

23. Nader Saiedi’s commentary on Bahá’u’lláh’s description of the spiritual journey in *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys* explains the nature of this dialectic. According to Saiedi, “the entire structure of [both works] can be understood as the dialectic of negation and affirmation. . . . Love implies relinquishing self-love in order to become united with the beloved. Knowledge implies going beyond the immediate suffering in order to attain wisdom” (102–3).

24. This garden image is a beautiful expression of the dialectic possibilities of gardens in Sufi iconography where water is associated with a double movement, in which the viewer’s gaze is carried “outward into the paradise of nature, and . . . inward . . . to the water, its spiritual center. Generating ever-expanding ripples, the fountain recommences the cycle of conscious expansion and contraction” (Bakhtiar 106; Fahim 252n43). Raschke writes on “the concept of the garden as a symbolic landscape that redefines spirituality” (44), contrasting the closed medieval garden with “the salvific garden [that] has fluid boundaries” (52) in *Memoirs*.

25. For example, Bahá’u’lláh exhorts the individual, “In the garden of thy heart plant naught but the rose of love” (*Hidden Words*, “From the Persian,” #3, 51). Using the work of Laleh Bakhtiar, Fahim describes how “the mystic must encounter ‘the tree of life or immortality’ which grows in the ‘Garden of the heart . . . the abode of intuition’” (Fahim 211).

26. The cannibal children also suggest Derrida’s centerless new world, which he also describes as monstrous (see “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”).

27. Unlike Sharon Wilson (14), I do not see the black pockmarked egg as itself positive. Rather, I see it as the embodiment of the Survivor’s old way of being that she is now ready to discard. Fahim describes “the hatching of the egg” as “the climax of the inner action” (132) and also finds the egg positive, associating it with the philosopher’s stone and its black color with “wisdom and leadership” (120).

28. This state suggests the belief of Ibn ‘Arabi that while God’s essence is unknowable, God’s attributes are found in all created things. Therefore, commenting on the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, William Chittick writes that “everything in the universe . . . is God’s self-disclosure . . . and, by having specific characteristics, it displays the traces of God’s names” (*Self-Disclosure* 52). Thus the Survivor has reached the state where the veil covering the divine presence in the world has been lifted, and she sees “the traces of God’s names” in everything.

29. See Perrakis, “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space,” for a fuller discussion of these two perspectives and the significance of their interaction. Both of these perspectives are part of the compilation of documents by Canopean archivists relating to Canopean interaction (in particular, the interaction of the envoy Johor) with Shikasta that constitutes the novel.

30. In “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space,” I argue that the assemblage of documents compiled by Canopean archivists that constitutes *Shikasta* lays bare the process by which Canopus comes to accept that Shikasta is worth the sacrifices required.

31. See Perrakis, “The Whirlpool and the Fountain,” for a discussion of how Lessing incorporates the personal pain of her childhood lack of attunement with the mother and deepened loss of connectedness following the birth of her baby brother in *love, again* (95). These same painful early experiences, which become almost a personal myth of the fall from paradisiacal closeness to the mother, are also found in *Under My Skin* and *Memoirs*.

32. See Perrakis, “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space,” for a discussion of the theme of the interrelationship of all peoples in *Shikasta*.

33. LaCapra notes that one response of historians or teachers to dealing with Holocaust testimonies is to retreat into “excessive objectification that restricts historiography to narrowly empirical and analytic techniques and denies or downplays the significance of the problems of subject position and voice in coming to terms with the implication and response of the historian with respect to the object of study” (99–100). I wish to thank my colleague Jeanie Warnock for introducing me to the work of Dominick LaCapra.

34. See my earlier discussion of the significance of Johor’s additional reports in “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space” (232–34).

35. Lessing seems to be portraying the Sufi idea that “God is present and finds Himself in all things, and man witnesses this presence and finding to the extent of his capacity” (Chittick, *Sufi Path* 226–27). This concept is known as the oneness of being. Sensitized by their hardships, the man and woman in the *Shikasta* passage are now able to see the divine qualities of the tree as a “fine, high shimmering light” (256). Fahim discusses this passage in her chapter on *Shikasta*, noting that it indicates an ability to see beyond “the physical level” and incorporates “knowledge of a different dimension” (210). Fahim also relates this passage to the encounter by “the narrator of *Memoirs*” with “the ‘realm of possibilities’ in her ascent” (214).

Gayle Greene also comments on this passage, noting that “Johor is drawn into a compassionate involvement with Shikastans that goes beyond necessity, into identification with the race that, though so nearly lost, is capable of heights of courage and faith” (172). Greene does not, however, as I do, discuss how Johor develops both detachment and identification—“empathic unsettlement.”

36. See “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space,” where I comment further on how Lessing uses the structure of the novel to enable her readers to reach new understandings (221).

37. Fahim develops this point even further and reads the presentation of Rachel in terms similar to mine. She notes that “because of the way the novel had been constructed, a distance is set up between us and Rachel’s point of view—a distance that detaches us from identifying with her despite the fact that she represents the normative point of view” (217). Gayle Greene points out something similar, noting that “we read knowing Rachel’s history in Zone Six, scrutinizing her story for signs that she is passing or failing her test. We have become informed readers, have learned to see and hear in new ways—to hear double meanings, to see a variety of possible perspectives on an event” (167).

38. In Zone Six we see how easily Rilla (and Ben, too) gets caught up in the whirlpools of sand (the manifestations of Shammat [the realm of evil]) that sweep through that zone swallowing everything in their path (189–92). A little later they lose their focus and get totally absorbed in little blobs of light (263), perhaps a symbol for the material distractions of Shikasta. While Johor is able to save them on Zone Six from both the whirlpool and the lights, once born into Shikasta reality they will have to respond to George (Johor’s manifestation in Shikasta) in order to save themselves.

39. See “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space” for earlier references to the whirlpool force as associated with Shammat (231–32).

40. Fahim reads Rachel’s death positively as an ascent “to higher levels” in which “she guides others on the path” (224).

41. While there has been some discussion of *Shikasta*’s spiritual vision, as I note above, there has been no close look at the spiritual dynamics governing characters’ abilities to recognize and respond to George Sherban. See, for example, “Doris Lessing’s Prophetic Voice in *Shikasta*” by Jeannette Webber, in *Spiritual Exploration in the Works of Doris Lessing*, and brief discussions of *Shikasta* in essays by Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis and Josna Rege in that same volume. Shadia Fahim gives a Sufi reading of *Shikasta* in *Doris Lessing and Sufi Equilibrium*, and Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis looks at its spiritual vision as a marriage of psychospiritual and science fiction perspectives in “The Marriage of Inner and Outer Space” Gayle Greene does an interesting comparison of *Shikasta* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in her chapter on *Shikasta* in *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change*.

42. Fahim associates Suzannah with “the physical side” of life, as opposed to Lynda Coldridge, who works on developing “Capacities of contact” and notes that both “are indispensable for the development of humanity” (232).

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CHAPTER 3



Through the “Wall”

*Crone Journeys of Enlightenment and Creativity
in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood,
Keri Hulme, and Other Women Writers*

SHARON R. WILSON

Frequently, the aged and aging narrators and personas in recent women's literature are viewed as Medusa monsters like the one at Avilion, the Tennysonian estate in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*. Looking out from wrinkled and deteriorating bodies, their gazes may indeed seem like freezing evil eyes, partly because we are afraid to see, hear, and know what they know—views usually at odds with official or approved opinions. Like the unnamed narrator of Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, these women who watch, analyze, and speak out about the destruction around them may seem cold and unfeeling, resembling the Stone Angel in Margaret Laurence's novel of this title. Sometimes, like Rosario Ferre's Aunt in “The Youngest Doll,” their rage over being used emerges subversively in their creations or, like Maryse Condé's Tituba, they are even hanged as witches and speak after death. Nevertheless, as in Angela Carter's “The Bloody Chamber,” where a mother saves the daughter married to Bluebeard, their wisdom helps structure other women's escapes and sometimes promises to save humanity.

Crone figures in the works of many contemporary women writers are based in myth. Part of the Great Goddess, the crone aspect of the cycle is Hecate and the old moon, differentiated from the Diana or

the virgin (new moon) and Venus or the mother (full moon) but, like other phases of the Triple Goddess, suggesting the moon in all three of her aspects. Although the crone is the “old” aspect and may be associated with death, she is not of a fixed age and also suggests rebirth. Wise, a heavenly midwife, and the deity of magic and prophecy, in the early Middle Ages Hecate was labeled queen of the witches (Walker 378–79), illustrated by the plotting witches in *Macbeth*. Other figures representing the dark aspect of the moon include fairy-tale witches in “Sleeping Beauty” and “Snow White,” female vampires, and werewolves. Discussing the woman as nature and nature as monster themes in reference to the “bumper crop” of Hecates (often portrayed as ice or rock) in Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood points out that Hecate or the crone “is not sinister when viewed as part of a process” (*Survival* 199–201).

Mother of all the gods and of the past, present, and future, like other aspects of the Great Goddess, and represented by the crone moon, Medusa is closely related to Hecate and is also the basis for crone figures in contemporary women writers’ works. Also connected to the Cretan snake goddess (Pratt 28–29), Medusa was the serpent goddess of the Libyan Amazons, a gorgon associated with menstrual blood and once thought to turn a man to stone and with female genitalia “lacking” a penis (Walker 629; Pratt 34–35). Like other females either associated with snakes or actually snakes or dragons (e.g., Keats’s *Lamia*), Medusa’s power threatened patriarchy so much that men such as Perseus and St. George established themselves as heroes by beheading her, symbolically castrating her (Freud 105; Pratt 30). According to Freud, Medusa “is a representation of a woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated.” Thus, since “To decapitate =s to castrate,” her horrifying decapitated head represents the fear of castration (105–6).

Sometimes considered masked to those not ready to be initiated to her mysteries, “to the Greeks, Medusa represented ‘the Ugly bogey-Erinyes-side of the Great Mother’” (Harrison 193–94). Ironically demonized in patriarchal religions in the same way as Eve, the biblical snake, and the snakes that adorn her hair and the arms of the Minoan snake goddess, Medusa, like Persephone, may have been a rape victim, one of many women to whom gods “descend.” In the medieval period she was thought to be so beautiful that no one could bear to look at her, the embodiment of a feminine sensuality considered “a monstrous crime against womanhood.” Often, she has signified not only the fear

of female beauty but also "maternal anger and the threat of feminine revenge" (Pratt 40).

Most significantly, like Hecate, Medusa actually symbolizes divine female wisdom, often the "all-judging eye of wisdom" (Walker 629). For poets, Medusa is an archetype of female creativity, of "powers previously hidden and denigrated" (Pratt 55, 40). Often the Medusa gaze has been considered the artist's ability to impose "beauty and form upon the chaotic flux of experience" (Hazel Barnes, qtd. in Pratt 38); thus, the female artist has been seen as the opposite of the nurturing mother and, therefore, a monster.

However, as the references to castration suggest, male and female writers do sometimes see Medusa crones differently: "For [Robert] Graves, as for most British and American male poets, the Medusa archetype is dominated by her negative content, distancing them from any blessings that might lurk behind her mask. . . . [African American male] poets tend to associate the classical Medusa with the threat of being lynched/castrated through seduction by a white woman" (Pratt 59, 70). Male poets who treat Medusa negatively, often approaching Medusa with Perseus's perspective, include Robert Bly, Joel Oppenheimer, Howard Nemerov, Robert Hayden, and Robert Lowell (Pratt 43, 42–50). Although some female poets, such as Kathleen Raine, "perceive Medusa through gynophobic lenses," "twentieth-century women poets tend to seek out powers hidden in 'denigrated' archetypes such as Medusa" (Pratt 51, 63). A number of canonical male writers have looked to female muses to inspire their poems. But these muses are generally described as young, beautiful, and fickle (Shakespeare's Dark Lady, Marvell's Coy Mistress), and sometimes *femmes fatales* such as Heine's Loreley and Keats's La Belle Dame sans Merci and, especially, Lamia, who is a snake. Often considered a witch or bitch in men's literature (e.g., Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*, Chaucer's Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales*), women who have evolved beyond woman-on-a-pedestal and sex-object-bound-for-garbage positions (see Mailer, "The Time of Her Time") are often perceived as Medusa images, frequently recognized by women writers as part of themselves (Condé's Mama Yaya). Again, however, critics, especially males, have sometimes misinterpreted Medusa imagery. Thus, Frank Davey finds Atwood's female artists paralyzed: "Yet for Atwood art itself seems inevitably to possess the 'gorgon touch' and to transform life into death, flesh into stone. . . . Atwood's poems circle back on themselves, recreating one central drama of artist-woman

engaged in an unsuccessful struggle to escape art for mortality" (149, 151–52; see Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy* 150).

Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, May Sarton, Keri Hulme, Margaret Laurence, and Maryse Condé all use characters who are Hecate or Medusa crones. All use their Medusa vision to discover creative possibilities within themselves and their Medusa touch to establish or reestablish human contact. Because scholars often do not recognize Great Goddess symbolism, including Medusa, as one dimension of the Goddess, few readers would associate Sethe's goddess touch in Morrison's *Beloved* with either Isis or Medusa. As Paul D puts it, Sethe, who wears a goddess tree of life on her back but is considered a monster, makes him whole: "She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order." In this metafiction about the need to "rememory," resee, and then move on from the story of slavery, it is only appropriate that he wishes to put his *story* next to hers (272–73; see Wilson, "Morrison").

Concerned especially with artists like herself, the mature narrator in Sarton's *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* says that "We are all monsters . . . we women who have chosen to be something more and something less than women!" (155–56). Thus, in portraying women's journeys toward wisdom, Louise Bogan, May Sarton, Margaret Atwood, and other women poets recall and usually revision mythic Medusas. Although Bogan's persona suffers the classic paralysis when she meets "the stiff bald eyes" (1569), when the persona of Sarton's "The Muse as Medusa" has the courage to look at Medusa's face, she sees it as her own face and begins the road to healing and wisdom. Imagining herself as a naked fish, she swims in mystery:

Forget the image: your silence is my ocean,
And even now it teems with life. . . .
I turn your face around! It is my face,
That frozen rage is what I must explore—
Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!
This is the gift I thank Medusa for. (1690–91)

As Sarton's artist elaborates in *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, once you recognize Medusa, "It is yourself who must be conquered" (161–62). For female as well as male writers, the muse is always she (180). Old women, Medusas and Hecates, can be muses, inspiring creation rather than destruction, beauty rather than frozen rage, teeming

life rather than stasis. Atwood, too, speaks of her muse as a woman, an old woman (*Margaret Atwood: Once in August*), but she insists on the necessity of the woman writer to create rather than simply to inspire and destroy in the tradition of Robert Graves's "White Goddess" ("The Curse of Eve" 224) and presents struggles of narrators and personas of various ages, such as that of Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, to accept and evolve beyond selves perceived as monstrous. Doris Lessing also alludes to aspects of the Great Goddess and speaks of old stories as inspiring hers: "I always use these old, hoary symbols, as they strike the unconscious" (Tomalin 174; Lessing, "Address"). Hardly doomed, as Clement sees her, Medusa can laugh (Cixous 347–62) because she sees and knows, and characters recalling her are able to talk back to patriarchy. As Keri Hulme says in an interview, she also draws on old stories and ancestors: "You can't ever be alone: the air you breathe is full of other people, other beings—and all their breathing—and you yourself are a knit and weaving of a thousand generations" ("Keri Hulme" 212). The Maori term for this concept in English is "Carrying your ghosts on your shoulders" (Bryson 131). Hulme, too, uses old, nearly infertile female bodies to hope "impossible things" through a "cuckoo child"¹ who helps return rather than displace family ("He Hoha" [What a Fuss], qtd. in Fee 58–59).

When they are self-conscious narrators, aware of telling a story and commenting on it, crone narrators express the growth of self-awareness directly through language: often beginning speechless, like the tongueless, sacrificed maidens on the Sakiel-Norn planet of Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, they gradually learn to use words to shape not only their artist selves but also their whole selves, healed of body/mind divisions (*Surfacing*, *The Reckoning*); of hand, heart, eye, and ear amputations (*The Blind Assassin*); of societal diseases expressed in the body (*The Bone People*, *Bodily Harm*); and of socially and culturally conditioned madness (*The Four-Gated City*), repression, and low self-concept (*The Stone Angel*, *Martha Quest*, *The Edible Woman*, *Memoirs of a Survivor*).

Not only do Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* and *Memoirs of a Survivor*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* present evolving crone narrator-artists, but Atwood's, Lessing's, and Hulme's books and their authors also share a number of significant similarities germane to an understanding of crone wisdom. Atwood and Lessing especially share similar concerns and techniques. Both sometimes write dystopian/

utopian, apocalyptic novels of ideas, both dramatize humanoid “others,” and both present somewhat autobiographical female narrators who, as young women, are caught up in the beauty myth, in sacrificing themselves to others’ desires (*Martha Quest*, *The Blind Assassin*), and in conformity (*Cat’s Eye*, *Life Before Man*, *Martha Quest*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Fifth Child*). Both have even inspired operas and experimental music. While earlier works may see age as “the dark,” the end of sexuality, and death (*The Summer Before the Dark*, *Cat’s Eye*), texts written when their authors are older reveal a different view of aging as a time of wisdom, creativity, and even love (*Memoirs of a Survivor*, *love, again*, *The Robber Bride*).

Since Atwood, Lessing, and Hulme all grew up in colonized cultures, it is probably no accident that their characters have to struggle to survive spiritually and even physically. Although Lessing grew up in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) as a colonial, and although she and Atwood (and because of mixed heritage, Hulme to some extent) shared the privileges of “whiteness,” they have all actively opposed institutionalized racism and imperialism. Their work (Atwood’s *Survival*, Lessing’s *Martha Quest* and Canopus series, Hulme’s *The Bone People*) is explicitly or implicitly critical of both literal and secondary or metaphorical colonialism. Atwood’s, Lessing’s, and Hulme’s narrators often watch themselves and their worlds fall apart spiritually and physically before they can take action to begin healing. Although Atwood’s narrators are often folklore tricksters, all three writers sometimes use self-conscious, developing, partly unreliable narrators who practice writing as a means of ordering, growing, and knowing in their metafiction (*The Golden Notebook*; *Memoirs of a Survivor*; *Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*; *Lady Oracle*; *The Blind Assassin*; *The Bone People*). As postmodern and postcolonial writers, all three use popular culture intertexts, especially myths, fairy tales, and folklore, and the characterization, images, themes, structures, and techniques (e.g., magical realism) associated with them, to portray their characters’ growth. Since Lessing’s and Hulme’s texts sometimes leave “realistic” chronological and linear time for a mythic one, although characters may worry about aging (*The Summer Before the Dark*), scar, suffer illnesses or broken bones (*The Bone People*), or have difficulty taking care of themselves (*The Diaries of Jane Somers*), the journey toward wisdom is more spiritual than physical, sometimes involving movement through walls of the mind and the appearance of mythic beings, including ghosts, shamans, and goddesses.

Atwood has frequently focused on aging narrators and personas associated with goddesses, as in her "aging female poet poems" (*New Poems* 1985–86, *Selected Poems* [SP] II), where one persona, aware of "the red life that is leaking / out of me into time," wonders why men want so much of her attention ("Aging Female Poet Sits on the Balcony," SP II 125). The persona of "Aging Female Poet Reads Little Magazines" cannot remember if she was ever like the "young beautiful women poets" who "write poems like blood in a dead person," and that of "Aging Female Poet on Laundry Day" scrupulously washes everything as she thinks that "whatever exists at the earth's center will get me / sooner or later" (SP II 127, 129). In *Good Bones* (1992), the persona of the final flash fiction speaks to her aging bones as she would to a dog, praising them for tricks and urging them to "Keep on going" (152–53). Atwood's grandmother figures often have magic healing hands (*Bodily Harm*, *The Robber Bride*) and, as in "Five Poems for Grandmothers," wisdom to pass on: "Sons branch out, but / one woman leads to another" (SP II 14). Some of her characters and personas (e.g., Zenia in *The Robber Bride*; "Snake Woman," SP II) are snake women or snake goddesses. While the persona of "A Red Shirt" sews a red shirt for her daughter, the moon is in its Hecate phase. She not only connects Hecate and Medusa but also links them to storytelling as they inspire her own creativity:

But red is our color by birth-

right, the color of tense joy
& spilled pain that joins us

to each other. We stoop over
the table, the constant pull

of the earth's gravity furrowing
our bodies, tugging us down.

The shirt we make is stained
With our words, our stories.

The shadows the light casts
On the wall behind us multiply:



This is the procession
of old leathery mothers,

the moon's last quarter
before the blank night,

mothers like worn gloves
wrinkled to the shapes of their lives,

passing the work from hand to hand,
mother to daughter,

a long thread of red blood, not yet broken

The persona then tells a story about the “Old Woman,” the weaver of life threads (the *Morae*), the witch, the Black Madonna, worshipped but “hated & feared, though not by those who know her.” Hoping to protect her daughter from charms and fables, she sews a new “myth,” the “private magic” of the poem, and “the air explodes with banners” as her daughter delights in the shirt (*SP* 47–51).

Although Atwood depicts a number of witches, including the landlady in *The Edible Woman*, Auntie Muriel and even Elizabeth in *Life Before Man*, Mrs. Smeath in *Cat's Eye*, and the narrator's mother and Serena Joy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as her narrator's vision grows, these witches turn into crones. In *The Blind Assassin*, not only Grandmother Adelia and Iris but also the young Sabrina are associated with a promised Medusa vitality: “her long dark hair [is] coiled like sleeping serpents” (288). Unlike many of Avilion's residents, Iris and Sabrina are more than marble fireplace ornaments and are able to meet a patriarchal gaze.

To a greater extent than Lessing, Atwood makes the physical dimensions of aging visceral, and she details male as well as female aging. In *The Blind Assassin* Iris records her wrinkles and physical frailty more meticulously than her earlier, stylized blonde beauty. In Atwood's *Life Before Man* Nate constantly paces his shadow as he runs toward death as well as life and is afraid he will never be able to leap through the glass of life to be involved, to be his mother's son, a father, *and* a husband. In her *Oryx and Crake*, unlike the males of the created species,

who will not age and will instead suddenly die at thirty, Snowman examines his gray hair and sagging, starving body and calculates how much longer he can live. Monstrous precisely because he is one of few surviving humans, Snowman, the Abominable, still gains some wisdom in his journey to tell his apocalyptic tale.

In Atwood's most recent novel, *The Penelopiad* (2005), Penelope has grown from a giggling fifteen-year-old prize in an archery contest to a wise trickster crone. As in Tennyson's "Ulysses," Odysseus must "leave to seek a newer world" at least partly because he is "[m]atched with an aged wife" (Tennyson 1213–14). We discover, however, that Penelope is much more than an archetypal faithful wife. Speaking retrospectively from Hades, Penelope reports that the suitors called her an old bitch and an old cow but admits to the truth in rumors that she was jealous of her cousin Helen, that she slept with all the suitors—more than a hundred—and supposedly gave birth to Pan. She may even have ordered the deaths of the twelve maids, who were spying for her, to keep them quiet about her activities. Although she does not know everything, she still carries a sack full of words and continues to speak with no mouth because she "like[s] to see a thing through to the end" (4).

Atwood's novels generally involve quests of fragmented, blind narrators who grow in vision and wisdom as they create. Like the traditional narratives Atwood often parodies, her recent novel, *Oryx and Crake*, uses a male quester and a female muse, but in this case it is to inspire both of its Frankenstein artists to monstrous creation. Mysterious and fickle but definitely a new spin on Shakespeare's stylized Dark Lady, Oryx represents an idealized perversion of the contemporary sex-slave trade and the patriarchal gaze's literal prostitution of its object. The symbolic mother of the created species, Oryx is paradoxically also the book's exterminating angel. Ironically dispensing a product called BlyssPluss, providing unlimited libido and sexual prowess and protecting against sexually transmitted diseases, she sterilizes people without their knowing it and, probably unknowingly, infects people with the virus that may make the human species extinct.

In this metafiction steeped in its Frankensteinian culture of empty-socket vision, again paradoxically, the somewhat androgynous Snowman, more than Oryx, resembles Lessing's, Hulme's, and Atwood's crone narrators: he, too, journeys from silence and blindness in youth to vision and art in old age. In a world where it is nearly impossible to distinguish between cyborgs, monsters, and humans, Jimmy evolves

toward “crone” wisdom by faithfully caring for the constructed creatures (the Crakers), for whom he has taken responsibility, and by cherishing language and continuing to create against destruction even when there are no materials for writing and little possibility of a listener for his tale.

Also depicting the sex-slave compulsion in the science fiction, “novel,” and frame memoir narrative of a book within a book within another book, *The Blind Assassin* is narrated in the first, second, and third person by Iris Chase, a “blind assassin” crone who gradually reveals and understands the extent to which she not only has been one of her sister’s assassins but also has belonged to a culture of war, ruled by men with “heads on fire” resembling *Oryx and Crake*’s scientists. Iris is also one of Atwood’s recent wise crones, who reshapes her life as she shapes her memoirs: she is no longer concerned with pleasing father, husband, lover, or other women; no longer concerned with shoes that match her dress, with being a lady, or with whether or not she looks like a tramp.

Arising from what Atwood calls the same “UR-Manuscript,” “The Angel of Bad Judgment” (Margaret Atwood Papers), *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin* are period pieces about motherless main characters—self-conscious narrators—who evolve from youth to middle and old age by constructing stories, and therefore meaning or truth, about personal and public pasts. Both novels are metafictional puzzles about the inconsistencies between appearance and reality: the appearance of piety and propriety versus hidden murder, abuse, rape, and other violence (Wilson, “Magic”). In *The Blind Assassin* both Chase daughters are raised to be “feminine”: beautiful, passive, polite, self-sacrificing. Somehow Laura never manages to conform appropriately until she convinces herself that she can bargain with God to save Alex—the man both daughters love—in war. She remains silent about Iris’s husband Richard’s abuse, an event paralleled in the embedded science fiction novel by the sacrifice of mute virgins to the god of Sakiel-Norn.

For the self-conscious narrator Iris, Laura’s notebooks are the doors to the forbidden knowledge of the Bluebeard fairy tale and the key to unlocking her crone wisdom. These notebooks, hidden in a trunk suggesting the subconscious, function similarly to the red plastic purse and cat’s eye marble in Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*. In the Grimms’ “The Robber Bridegroom” and “Fitcher’s Bird” or Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” the third sister, the bride and goddess figure, discovers the dismembered pieces of her sisters, the previous brides, behind the locked door,

or alternatively, she sees another bride’s finger being cut off prior to being cooked for the groom’s dinner. Similarly, Laura Chase’s notebooks, from the two sisters’ study with their tutor, Mr. Erskine, reveal to Iris her amputated vision and touch—her complicity in her sister’s death—and stimulate her, like the Robber Bride, to tell the story:

Although Iris withholds knowledge about the contents of the notebooks from readers until “The Golden Lock” chapter near the end of her memoir, she discovers them in her stocking drawer the day Laura dies, too late to keep from uttering the words that send Laura over the bridge. . . . Iris symbolically releases herself as well as Laura from the tragic plot. [She becomes the crone.] She says she has to hurry and “can see the end, glimmering far up ahead of me.” She admits that, like fairy-tale characters, she is “Lost in the woods, and no white stones to mark the way, and treacherous ground to cover,” but she has learned a few tricks and will set things in order. (Wilson, “Magic”)

While the Latin notebook is about Dido and Aeneas, the geography notebook describes Port Ticonderoga, and the French one lists words Alex wrote in their attic, Laura’s math notebook contains the list of dates on which Richard tried to force, and eventually succeeded in having, sex with Laura. Laura’s photograph of Alex, herself, and Iris’s hand is pasted into the history notebook. Symbolically, however, resembling Atwood characters and narrators in *You Are Happy*, *Life Before Man*, and *Bodily Harm* (Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s *Fairy* 136–228) and mythologically a sister of the Harpies, Iris is revealed as a monster: her “hand”—her ability to express feelings openly—is lying unmissed in Laura’s photograph until she takes responsibility for her actions near the end of the novel and writes the story:

Because she learns to read the “code” of bruises with which Richard’s bad touch marks her body, and the code of dates in Laura’s notebook with which Laura similarly records his abuse, . . . Iris, like Laura, stops being the wife of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”: Laura’s abuse, like that of Iris, is no longer “papered over” (508), and Iris is not the tongueless victim of her character’s science fiction story but the bride who speaks out in “The Robber Bridegroom” fairy tale. The person who appears to be “Laura’s odd, extra hand, attached to no body . . . , [this] prim-lipped keeper of the keys, guarding the

dungeon in which the starved Laura is chained to the wall" (286), leaves a steamer trunk of words. . . . She and her protagonist, "Iris," are no longer mute, sacrificial virgins or Blind Assassins of the science fiction story or handless, helpless females. As in "The Girl Without Hands" fairy tale, Iris's cut-off hand grows back; as in the "Fitcher's Bird" fairy tale, Iris is able to reassemble the dismembered pieces of herself. (Wilson, "Magic")

This Medusa crone goddess, also Isis and the fairy-tale goddess, no longer castrated or silenced and more than an avenging angel, is a messenger as her name suggests: she uses language to tell the stories of not only her family, her lover, her country, and her century but also of all peoples, including those imagined in outer space. Her wisdom is the lesson that blind assassins are truly blind and, despite rhetoric, are still assassins: wars for human, national, and cultural reasons nevertheless maim and kill.

Often implying similar themes, Lessing, more than Atwood, explicitly marks the stages of awareness and the barriers to awareness in a journey that is simultaneously inner and outer. This is especially clear with the hierarchy of zones in *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1980). The hierarchy supposedly refers to degrees of consciousness rather than the worth of beings, who Zone Three at least says are equal. As Rubenstein suggests, "the very hierarchy of zones metaphorically suggests the esoteric ascent toward wisdom. . . . Consistent with this metaphor, but with its own further symbolism, is the alchemical marriage, in which the sacred union represents an aspect of the 'work' toward the ultimate goal of inner enlightenment" (61). Still, unlike the works of Atwood, this Lessing novel seems to have a mostly reliable Chronicler (marked, however, with perceptions of Zone Three) and an essentialist "good"; and it even has Providers, presumed to know what is best for all, who govern the Zones.

At the beginning of the novel, as in the Oedipus legend and medieval romance, there is a mythic curse or plague on the lands and embodied in the characters of the three zones we come to know: human and animal fertility is diminishing. As Fishburn suggests, the inhabitants of Zones Three, Four, and Five are self-destructively isolationist (86–89). Queen Al*Ith, the goddess character more highly evolved than Ben-Ata, the man the Providers specify she marry in order to father a child, communicates telepathically with humans and animals, thinks in terms of "we," and embodies the peace of her zone. They and Vahshi of Zone

Five change as they become caught up in romantic love and sexuality in performing their duties.

Although there is free travel back and forth between the zones, the self-conscious creator-narrator, Lusik, uses the hatching, wall, and transformation imagery also developed in *Memoirs of a Survivor* to describe Al*Ith's journey toward wisdom: she goes into "the deepest regions of herself, with a knowledge born that she knew would hatch out" as she gazes toward Zone Two (58–59). Later, her entrance is described as a dreaming "or idea she had stumbled into," and the shapes there, "a race of people so rare and fine they could pass through walls," seem to come from old tales, songs, and stories and, significantly, can be brought to life by the storytellers. Although "she had already gone beyond boundaries to be here at all," she knows she needs to return when she is better prepared so that she can penetrate the barrier of her "thick clumsy substance" (194, 196–97). Near the end of the novel, after years have passed, Al*Ith is separated from husband, son, sister, and all the spirit-fathers and children she has known. Older and apparently no longer beautiful, Al*Ith has changed so much that she could pass through Zone Three without being recognized. She is confined to a shed near the border of Zones Two and Three not only because Zone Three is no longer enough for her but also because her growing awareness, a difference often misperceived as monstrous, separates her from the other inhabitants. One day when she visits Zone Two, she does not come back. Gradually, other questers follow her path. Zone Two seems to represent what we all know but have forgotten, what is suggested by old songs, children's counting games, riddles, and rituals, an awakens people fear. As is usual in mystical journeys, before Al*Ith can ascend to the blue mists of Zone Two, she must descend to Zone Four, just as both Ben-Ata and Vahshi must experience different zones to achieve balance. Readers never clearly see Zone Two, and Zone Two is still not Zone One, where, presumably, the Providers reside. The different zones are spoken of as opposing mirrors and the marriages as a fusion of opposites.

This crone's journey is also creative. Interrupting the narrative of Al*Ith to speak to readers not as "I" but as "we," the narrator, Lusik, identifies himself as androgynous and suggests that Al*Ith and any of them can be a storyteller or Chronicler: "We are the visible and evident aspects of a whole we all share, that we all go to form. . . . I am . . . what I am at the moment I am that . . ." (197–98). Thus, the story

of Al*Ith is, for readers, simultaneously a visit to the zones (Fishburn 102), Al*Ith's creation, Al*Ith herself, and a way to wisdom.

The nameless crone narrator of Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor*, another transmuted storyteller, narrates her dystopian metafiction retrospectively from a mysterious position beyond the destruction of her world. Possibly utopian, certainly not in any realm of realism, this position establishes her as one who knows, possibly one who is no longer human, as she looks back upon all she has learned about the repressive past—hers, Emily's, Lessing's, Edwardian England's, and ours—about being human, and about the necessity to penetrate barriers to the unconscious and a mythic knowledge beyond words. In many respects, she lives in a “tower” similar to the one Kerewin Holmes inhabits in *The Bone People*, a solitary literal and symbolic window where, often accompanied by an animal helper, she can watch the continuous breakdown and reconstruction of her world. When this crone narrator penetrates the literal and symbolic wall to see an androgynous “she” who cleans and begins to heal the world destroyed by technology and violence, she joins in the cleansing and ordering and ultimately seems to become that “she,” the cyclical goddess of vision and wisdom who destroys in order to re-create. Perrakis suggests that each of the characters in the book, which Lessing describes as an autobiography, represents a part of the narrator as well as of Lessing (42). Thus, the flawed characters, including child criminals, transform and become part of the whole.

The book ends with frequently overlooked creation and goddess mythology suggesting a new beginning from a cracked iron egg (Wilson, “Cosmic Egg”). Evoking Greek creation myth from Hesiod's *Theogony*, Lessing's iron egg marks the end of the iron age of humanity (Newman 4) and becomes the egg of creation from chaos and darkness. The so-called ages of man include gold, silver, brass, hero demigods, and iron ages; the iron egg suggests the annihilation of evil humanity in the present (Hamilton 63, 69, 70). Paradoxically, however, as Morgan says, the egg can mean a cyclical return—I think a rebirth—of a different golden age than the one Hesiod envisions, that of the Great Goddess, who creates new world harmony. In Hamilton's account of the golden age, only men exist before Pandora, the first woman, comes to release plagues on humankind (70). Earlier, however, Pandora was part of the Great Goddess, possibly an underworld goddess associated with Hecate (Leach and Fried 843), and, typical of the way that patriarchy reversed goddess myths, she may have released not plagues but

benefits to humanity when she opened the box or jar. On an individual as well as cultural level, *Memoirs of a Survivor* promises present and future wisdom to those willing to follow their crone selves through the walls of consciousness to integration.

Creating a new mythology and a new family in another apocalyptic metafiction that marks a new beginning on several levels, in *The Bone People* (1984) Hulme, like Atwood, Lessing, Morrison, Ferre, and Erdrich, writes postcolonial metanarrative that embeds folklore and crosses cultural and national boundaries. Like Atwood's and Lessing's artist-narrators, Kerewin Holmes is initially divided and alienated, partly because she is doubly colonized as a New Zealand Maori. Like *Memoirs'* watcher, Kerewin journeys from chaos and disorder, disease, and the end of the world to order, healing, rebirth, and a new beginning that is, on different levels, the novel we read and a future beyond what human beings can achieve now. Hulme even uses many of the techniques, themes, and motifs Atwood and Lessing do, including italicized special passages, cycles, spirals, hands, mirrors and a turned-around mirror, the divided and alien self, survival, goddess images, and the quest for home, order, and pattern. Like several Atwood characters, Kerewin feels as if Dracula or other vampires are draining her, and, like, *Oryx and Crake*, this novel parodies and revisions canonical intertexts, in this case *Robinson Crusoe* and "The Fisher King." Like Lessing's *Memoirs* and *Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*, the self-conscious narrator seems androgynous and outside of conformist society. The evolving female artist who paints, designs, and builds clever objects such as her suneater as well as homes and meeting halls, composes and plays music, and writes, Kerewin is a mythic goddess in both wrecked and reborn states. Drawing on the tower imagery of "Rapunzel" and other fairy tales and of such writers as Yeats, Joyce, Peake, and Woolf, Hulme embeds fish, grail, crucifix, rosary, phoenix, aikido, *I-Ching*, tarot, and tricephalos images in a text that uses both English and Maori languages and opposes and then synthesizes Western and Maori religion, folklore, and literary traditions.

Kerewin is the kind of archetypal Rapunzel that Margaret Atwood describes: an Ice Virgin-Hecate figure, symbolically imprisoned alone in a tower that in this case classically symbolizes her alienation from (rather than incorporation of) the attitudes of society. As is usual in this archetype, she and her tower are one, and the "rescuer" is absent (*Survival* 209–10). Although Atwood sees this Rapunzel syndrome as characteristically Canadian, other cultures, especially colonized ones,

illustrate the same kind of repressive conditioning that affects self-esteem and creates victims rather than heroes. Because she is not interested in sexual relationships and does not conform to notions of a female as weak, demure, petite, emotional, passive, and “feminine,” Kerewin actually sees herself as genderless, neuter rather than female, and she wants to escape being either “mizzed or mistered” (47). She is an artist rather than muse or tongueless, handless maiden, but a “non-painting painter” who loses her art and, along with Joe, their Maori selves in the way that they live (62). Certainly this knife-carrying, heavy, muscular “pirate,” whose face is eczema-scarred and who has yellowed eyes, has never thought of herself as nature or as either nurturing or mothering. She initially thinks of the child Simon, whom she eventually adopts, as “it.” Her many valuable rings have nothing to do with adorning herself to look attractive or performing as “feminine” in either the Maori or Pakeha cultures she straddles; and, like her author, she rejects even a regular telephone to keep her in contact with the outside world. Hulme seems to parody reader expectations of female characters, novels, and gender roles deliberately. Because Kerewin is not submissive to desire and not seducible, some readers will think that she poses the traditional threat of the terrifying, castrating bitch (another crone role). Her beating of Joe certainly enforces this view, and at the end she explicitly defies patriarchy by giving her name to both Simon and Joe. Because the novel withholds a conventional “happy ending” and frustrates readers’ desires for a marriage resolution to a plot about a woman, man, and child, some may dismiss how radical Kerewin’s spiral journey and transformation are and how postcolonial and feminist her crone wisdom is.

At the beginning of a spiral-shaped metafiction in which “The End [Is] at the Beginning,” Kerewin, Joe, and Simon “are nothing more than people, by themselves. . . . But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great. Together, all together, they are the instruments of change” (4). The crest of Simon’s ancient Irish family is a phoenix, and all three characters are phoenixlike: they undergo archetypal journeys from being broken, diseased, lost, lonely, and internally and externally divided to being whole, well, found, and part of the family of humankind. Although we do not know Kerewin’s exact age, she is certainly not young, and if she is just “thirty odd” at the novel’s beginning (24), she appears to age in magical time extending beyond the present into a utopian future: as the book proceeds

in what seems like a hundred-year transformation, she, like the other main characters, experiences a symbolic death and rebirth, with both Joe and Kerewin accomplishing this through their encounter with wise ancestors.

Like nearly all of Atwood's characters and most of Lessing's, Kerewin is split or internally divided as we first see her, alone in a bar and alone in her tower, in an abyss and prison, cut off from her "ex-family" and the Maori value of community that she had cherished because she mistakenly believed "she was self-fulfilling, delighted with the pre-eminence of her art" (7). Again like Iris and Atwood's many "handleless" characters initially unable to touch, to be touched, or to be subjected to dismembering touch (Wilson, "Popular Culture"; *Sexual Politics* 136–228), Kerewin uses her still-poetic voice mostly to deconstruct rather than create. Although she dreams of a spider shadow that could indicate interconnectedness of all, her drawing initially refuses to come out. Her interior monologue is rife with the voice of her wisecracking but self-demeaning snark; in her "unjoy," in her "haggard ashdead world," she hides a "screaming" painting behind her desk and thinks:

"You are nothing," says Kerewin coldly. "You are nobody, and will never be anything, anyone."

And her inner voice, the snark, which comes into its own during depressions like this, says,

And you have never been anything at anytime, remember?

And the next line is. . . .

I am worn, down to the raw nub of my soul. (91–92)

Near the end of the novel, however, after renouncing any control over her life and journeying to her family's original hut, Kerewin wakes from her illness with stomach cancer to see "a thin wiry person of indeterminate age. Of indeterminate sex. Of indeterminate race"—a person without accent, and the one who has healed her (424–25). Kerewin stops at the family baches, dreams that she has diminished to bones, desires home in a larger sense than ever before, begins rebuilding the spiral Maori hall, and, writing what could be the story we read in her journal, her Book of the Soul, she places it in its chest and sets fire to both. Her story is phoenixlike, beginning from its ashes. Accompanied by her eyeless cat, she knows without eyes: she has crone wisdom. Like Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, which finishes and begins as its writer dies, and Lessing's *Memoirs*, which "ends" with the re-creation of the

world, Hulme's mythic text and intertexts signify beginnings from endings and a new family of humanity.

If women writers and their female creators are monsters, they are also healers who cause rebirth. Medusa crone narrators not only transcend paralysis and the monstrous to revision and reconstruct stories demeaning to women: they also model women's journeys through language into wisdom.

Note

1. A "cuckoo child," as in Hulme's poem "He Hoha" [What a Fuss], haunts the aging persona and causes her to bleed inside. According to Fee, cuckoos "lay their eggs in those of other, usually smaller birds; the chick hatches, pushes the natural chicks out, and is fed by the coopted adoptive parents." However, contrary to Fee's view that Simon does not displace another child, it could be argued that he does displace Joe's birth child. Still, Simon performs a symbolic function: he "ultimately returns Kerewin to her family and to her art" (Fee 59).

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PART II



Margaret Atwood

Doubling Back Through the Labyrinth

CHAPTER 4



Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* as Spiritual Adventure

EARL G. INGERSOLL

Margaret Atwood's Booker Prize novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) represents the spiritual adventure of its narrator, Iris Chase Griffen, as she struggles to complete her memoirs and the story of her family "before it's too late." Iris has a heart, as an earlier generation would have phrased it, along with an octogenarian's body, sliding relentlessly toward disintegration. Her old body would probably be less interesting in this narrative, were it not for the fact that this body is the increasingly unreliable vehicle for getting the story itself told, because Iris is almost the last person left who knows enough about what happened to tell it. If Doris Lessing had not already entitled one of her novels *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Atwood might well have adopted that title, since much of the pathos of this tragicomedy is the product of Iris's having survived all of her family, except for her estranged granddaughter with whom she has had no contact in years. Thus *The Blind Assassin* is flirting with a catastrophe in narration—the possibility that Iris's aged body could very well give out before she finishes telling the story. By the double accounting of narrative, such a catastrophe is unlikely to happen since readers have been led to believe in the First Law of First-Person Narration: the narrator will be alive at the end of the story. Even so, Iris's advanced age and heart condition create tension in this narrative, especially as the end nears, and some readers might worry that the narrative could simply stop, without an ending.

The narrative exposes a complex of tensions and anxieties in Iris as the responsibilities of telling this story force her to go back over elements of her family history and her own biography that are tremen-

dously painful and increasingly laden with guilt. Atwood clearly sets her viewpoint character off on a variety of spiritual journeys in which Iris will confront daunting challenges and pitfalls, with no guarantee that she will achieve the state of grace readers might be expecting at the end of such a journey of the human spirit. Because (like most of us) Iris wants to believe in her own innocence as a child, she will have to face the specter of at least contemplating vengeance on those who exploited her vulnerability as a little girl and as a young woman. These “memoirs” grant her the power to turn her enemies into villains whose evil she now can paint in its darkest hues. Similarly, she confronts the disabling trap of victimhood, of absolving herself of any agency in the past, painting herself as “innocent” *because* she was powerless to defend herself against those, such as her husband and sister-in-law, who seem to have enjoyed having the power to cause her pain. And there is the very large issue of her own sense of failure and guilt in treating others, even more vulnerable than she, with a cruelty mirroring the abuse she suffered at the hands of others. Another novel whose title Atwood might have borrowed is Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, because one major reason why Iris has undertaken the writing of these “memoirs” is an impulse toward a variety of deathbed atoning, an attempt to set things right by confessing her sins. If the reader who has become invested in the dynamic of Iris’s inner life is impelled by a desire to finish her story, that desire may be grounded in some concern that Iris might give up the project, not only because the truth is so difficult to grasp but also because this confession offers a self-portrait of a not entirely “nice” individual who has some rather unpleasant things to reveal about herself. Accordingly, these memoirs represent a spiritual journey of immense proportions, the ascent of a steep mountain path strewn with impulses toward revenge, delusions of victimhood, a cluster of guilt feelings—any group of which might be sufficient to encourage this aged pilgrim to sit down by the wayside in despair. Thus the very fact that Iris finishes this spiritual journey represented by her narrative is a testimony to Atwood’s faith in the possibility of such triumphs of the spirit, especially in the old who have every right to refuse the call to make such arduous journeys in their latter days.

In the context of fictional form, Iris’s premature death would be a catastrophe of immense consequences for the story because Atwood has framed the narrative as a variety of whodunit.¹ As Peter Brooks has theorized, the desire to know how a story ends generates the “narratable,” or what can be told as a story. That desire to know how the

narrative will end, according to Brooks, is the stimulus, rousing readers from their state of quiescence as they begin reading.² Pushing Brooks's thesis to the limit, desire in *The Blind Assassin* is generated out of its mysterious opening sentence: "Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge." As narrator and writer of her family's history, Iris also functions as a variety of detective, leading her readers toward a "truth" at the climax of the novel's plot. Given the notion of the *déjà lu* proposed by Roland Barthes,³ this text is generated out of a prodigious history of the "already read," or all the texts of detection, stretching back to the beginning with Oedipus, commonly credited with being the first detective in Western literature. And narrative's implication in desire is immediately apparent with the mention of Oedipus and his associations with Freudian psychoanalysis,⁴ but also with one particular variety of the whodunit, established in the Oedipus story, the narrative of the detective who discovers that the criminal he is pursuing is ultimately himself. Accordingly, readers are drawn toward the ending of *The Blind Assassin* to confirm their suspicions that it was Iris, *not* her dead sister Laura, who wrote the novel-within-a-novel "The Blind Assassin" and was therefore the lover of Alex Thomas, with whom Laura was also in love. But most importantly those readers are impelled forward by a desire for the truth of Iris's complicity in the apparent suicide of her sister, announced in the opening sentence.

Thus despite its vintage-Atwood moments of comedy, *The Blind Assassin* offers a contemporary tragedy in which the narrator, Iris Chase Griffen, is impelled to relate the story of her life in part as expiation for the "crime" she will reveal at the end. Because the narrative does indeed offer the "memoirs of a survivor," it ought not to be surprising that those memoirs have their origins in what W. B. Yeats so aptly troped as "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."⁵ Iris sets out on the spiritual adventure of writing her memoirs to explain in part why, like Herman Melville's Ishmael, she "alone survived" the calamity of her family's downfall. And yet because Iris is the one "whodunit," these memoirs are also inevitably implicated in her desire for atonement,⁶ for that state of grace in which the sinner, if not the "criminal," feels he or she has expiated past sins or crimes.

Perhaps more than the "whodunit" model, the genre of memoir offers a more appropriate paradigm for a journey of spiritual adventure for this older woman. Like the detective story, memoirs have become increasingly contaminated with illicit desire, for one patent

impulse of that genre is the expectation that the writer will eventually lead readers out of the “living room,” and other public areas of the writer’s history, and into the “bedroom,” with its erotic promise of exposing the private(s).⁷ As a very old writer of “memoirs,” Iris also excites expectations that she will reveal fugitive desires because having survived virtually everyone, she has nothing to lose in telling all.

If anything, the revelations of the aging are all the more appealing because of our culture’s embarrassment with the old body. Thus the spiritual journey of the aged—one thinks perhaps immediately of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”—is an even more powerful adventure because of the inevitable reminders of bodily decay. Bodily decrepitude produces not only the challenges of a physical being that has become undependable to ferry the spirit abroad, as the Greeks envisioned it being borne on the backs of dolphins, but also the frustrations with a body whose potential odiousness seems guaranteed to encourage the spirit to unmoor itself from a physical being, resulting at best in humor and at worse in a sense of unbearable loathsomeness. One recalls Yeats’s troping of his own elderly body as a “battered kettle” “tied to me / As to a dog’s tail.”⁸ In a sense Atwood pioneers the representation in Iris of the old *female* writer, setting out like Tennyson’s Ulysses on one last adventure of the spirit, confronting what readers have learned to expect more frequently in old *male* writers such as Yeats, the writer forced to confront declining energy to make the words dance their way across the page, questioning the sanity of attempting what may be no longer possible, and despite it all *defying* the potential catastrophe of the novelist for whom the end of her life may come before the end of her narrative.⁹

It is not entirely a digression to note here that these concerns with writing and the writer’s death are not unique to *The Blind Assassin*. In her book of essays *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood devotes the final chapter, or essay, to teasing out the implications of the book’s title. To begin with, the “Dead” represent for the writer all those Dead Authors with whose ghosts she must negotiate while writing, in a context not so far afield from T. S. Eliot’s notion in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” or from the more recent notion of intertextuality, the weaving of texts in the context of the *déjà lu*, the already read. Atwood generalizes that “*all* writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead” (156). The “*all*” at

the beginning of the excerpt above marks Atwood's own emphasis, suggesting that this is a very strong statement of her belief as a storyteller. Furthermore, she is concerned in this chapter with answering a central question of "why should it be writing, over and beyond any other art or medium, that should be linked so closely with anxiety about one's own personal, final extinction?" (158). It is hardly coincidence that she was at work on the Cambridge lectures on which these essays were based while she was also working on *The Blind Assassin*. And even though she would likely be annoyed by my interjecting biographical considerations here, it is difficult not to read some of Atwood's own growing concern with mortality in both *Negotiating with the Dead* and *The Blind Assassin*.¹⁰

With the assumption that if she doesn't laugh she will cry, Iris holds up her deteriorating, increasingly unreliable body as a comic mask, or perhaps more accurately as a mirror reflecting our culture's sense of horror and dark humor in confronting the very old body. In the first scene of the novel's "present," Iris catalogs the menaces of her home, beginning with the shower, where she must not drop the soap: "I'm apprehensive of falling. Still, the body must be hosed down, to get the smell of nocturnal darkness off the skin. I suspect myself of having an odour I myself can no longer detect—a stink of stale flesh and clouded, aging pee." The stairs have become another challenge: "I have a horror of tumbling down them—of breaking my neck, lying sprawled with undergarments on display, then melting into a festering puddle" (35). And her body, reflected in the eyes of the young, verges on the obscene: her arm is "a brittle radius covered slackly with porridge and string," and her scalp is "the greyish pink of mice feet. If I ever get caught in a high wind my hair will all blow off like dandelion fluff, leaving only a tiny pockmarked nubbin of bald head" (37). The greatest threat, however, is her doctor's report of what she remembers was once called having "*a heart*, as if healthy people didn't have one" (42). Setting aside for the time being the metaphoric implications of this "heart," it is the resulting dizzy spells, more than anything else, that warn her of the possibility that death could be only seconds away. Once again humor seems her last weapon to defend herself from spiritual death, or despair, while waiting for the end: "Having long ago whispered *I want to die*, I now realize that this wish will indeed be fulfilled, and sooner rather than later. No matter that I've changed my mind about it" (42). To counter such "morbidity," Iris shares her strategy for dealing with the deterioration of her sphincters, having mapped her

neighborhood's toileting facilities—"so useful if you're caught short" (84). This, then, is the broken-down writing instrument through whom the narrative has chosen to represent itself, an aging body beginning a marathon race with "*a heart*" threatening to stop before her story has a chance to end, or end with any sense of closure. Alternately, Iris tropes the heart she relies on this way: "I think of my heart as my companion on an endless forced march, the two of us roped together, unwilling conspirators in some plot or tactic we've got no handle on" (83).

In a sense, then, Iris's advanced age is central to her narrating and to the narrative it produces. Given her "heart," Iris could easily short-circuit the reader's desire for the end by revealing the "truth" of her complicity in Laura's suicide in the first chapter and with it end the story quickly, while she still has a chance to. Like other writers, however, Iris knows that "the readiness is all," that narrative takes on a life of its own, and, as Peter Brooks has reminded us, plot must end only after a sufficient time has elapsed and "the middle" has prepared readers for "the end."¹¹ And the "truth" is a good deal more complicated: unlike the whodunit depending entirely on the simplistic notion that the "truth" has a criminal's name written on it, this narrative cannot begin to reveal a truth, recalled and imagined by Iris, without persuading its readers to believe that only a history of the Chase family, beginning at least with Iris and Laura's grandparents,¹² can help in explaining why Laura drove a car off a bridge. In addition, that sense of a long history, reaching back to encompass the lives of her parents and grandparents, undoubtedly exacerbates Iris's sense of old age and bodily decrepitude, almost as though she feels that she now bears the weight of the family's age, along with her own. Finally, since the "present" of the novel is the year 1998, Iris's sense of age and decrepitude is also exacerbated by this *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere, produced by an awareness that the century ushered in with the bright hopes of her grandparents is now tottering toward its (millennial) end, as Iris struggles to complete a history of its dark and painful events.

As memoirist and family historian, Iris engages her readers through her wit, her intelligence, but mainly her effort to be honest in revealing her moral failings as well as her awareness of the limits of her art. As earlier indicated, Iris as a spiritual adventurer is hardly anyone's sweet and lovable old granny. Increasingly, her cruelty toward those she loves—especially but not exclusively toward her sister Laura—and her sins of omission reveal her immersion in the "fury and the mire of human veins."¹³ It is, however, Iris's growing pessimism concerning the

potential for her writing to make truth-claims that cannot keep readers from suspecting the author's own awareness of truth being always at least in part the product of human imagination and the poetic reconstruction of the past, and that historiography is less science than art, and accordingly like other texts it is inevitably implicated in "fiction."

Indeed, the text tropes the body in terms of history. Iris reports: "My bones have been aching again, as they often do in humid weather. They ache like history: things long done with, that still reverberate as pain" (56). Her own personal history survives in the form of a few metonyms her survivors will dispose of in dark plastic bags, although "any life is a rubbish dump even while it's being lived." These metonyms are offered like a small impressionist poem: "The nutcracker shaped like an alligator, the lone mother-of-pearl cuff link, the tortoiseshell comb with missing teeth. The broken silver lighter, the saucerless cup, the cruet stand minus the vinegar. The scattered bones of *home*, the rags, the relics. Shards washed ashore after shipwreck" (57). For readers with an investment in writing, however, the real fascination lies in Iris's revelations of the arduous effort to get the words down on paper. She writes: "I'm not as swift as I was. My fingers are stiff and clumsy, the pen wavers and rambles, it takes me a long time to form the words. And yet I persist, hunched over as if sewing by moonlight" (43). We should also note that because she is more than eighty years old, Iris has missed the technological revolution of word processing. A primitivist writer, Iris relies on a cheap ballpoint pen—threatening, like her heart, to run out on her—and a single hard copy, with all the existential vulnerability such an artifact used to hold for writers who could not easily make copies of a day's textual production.¹⁴ Like her wispy hair that, as she reports, a strong wind could blow away, the manuscript she generates while sitting in her garden could vanish in a sudden gale. At the same time, Iris's textual production becomes a trope for the web her narrative spins, as though her being were flowing, as she describes it, down her arm and through her finger, onto the blank page before her—a concretizing of Hélène Cixous's injunction to women that they ought to "write through their bodies and fluids" (290).¹⁵

Like the delegating of the narration to Iris, this focus on textual production enhances the novel's self-reflexivity, as readers are encouraged to visualize the text being generated right before their eyes. The notion of writing with the body¹⁶ is closely related to Iris's concern with an even larger challenge to writing than the lack of the strength and dexterity required by the physical act. That concern is with yet

another source of potential despair for the writer—the virtual impossibility of telling the truth. Iris begins with the assumption that she has no audience in mind for this text, not even herself, since she may not be fortunate enough to complete the story, much less read it if she does. “Perhaps I write for no one,” she proposes. In her eyes, that would be the best of all possible worlds, and it is crucial that we note this aspiration at the outset¹⁷ because, as we suspect, it is an ideal her narrative will ultimately fail to achieve. However, this is her statement of the ideal:

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it.

Impossible, of course.

I pay out my line, I pay out my line, this black thread I’m spinning across the page. (283)

Few passages are so central to this narrative. This passage establishes a kind of absurdist, self-destructing line of reasoning, reminiscent of the Greek Stoic philosopher Zeno’s famous self-defeating logical mechanisms.¹⁸ A text can represent the truth only if its author erases with the left hand what she has just written with her right, thus obliterating the text to preserve its truth or “destroying the text to save it.” For us weaker mortals who cannot conceive of an art that must be immediately destroyed, a web to be unraveled as it is woven—like the shroud Penelope¹⁹ weaves each day for her father-in-law, Laertes, only to unravel it each night—the only alternative is to bear the text’s inevitable contamination by the “fury and the mire of the human heart” impelling writers to ensnare their readers, including themselves, in the “fiction,” the “excusing yourself” for the writer’s humanness.

In this way *The Blind Assassin* seems intent on problematizing the notion of “the truth” as the immediately preceding novel, *Alias Grace*, also did with its subversion of the whodunit. Readers of the earlier novel who were familiar with the subtle, “poetic” narrative Atwood crafted in, say, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, also rendering the conventional notion of the ending problematic, were unlikely to have much faith that Grace was apt to reveal herself as a guilty accomplice to murder

near the end of the story she was narrating. As I have argued,²⁰ *Alias Grace* subverts the whodunit's simplistic confidence that guilt can be so easily ascertained, or that those involved in crimes, if anyone, ought to know the extent of their guilt. Like *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* offers a narrative being generated by a participant in the events represented, acknowledging that memoir, like historiography, is a reconstruction and not some precise and accurate snapshot of "the truth." Thus, in a sort of parody of the denied expectations of readers, as she is nearing the end of *The Blind Assassin*, Iris will reveal that it was she "whodunit," and yet, as she has prepared "her" readers to expect, this narrative has been (inevitably) a web in which she has been excusing herself to the (single) reader for whom it has been generated, her granddaughter Sabrina, the (sole) heiress of the Chase and Griffen families and, probably more importantly, the heiress of the next century and millennium. Once again, following this pastiche of Zeno's logic, if this text has not been erased by its writer, it is inevitably implicated in "fiction" or "excusing yourself."

And Iris has her work cut out for her if this family history is to be, in part at least, an *apologia pro vita sua*. As it becomes readily apparent, Iris is bent less on "telling the truth" than on explaining herself to the last member of the family whose good opinion she cares about—her granddaughter Sabrina. Like another aging novelist, Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, Iris is motivated to explain, and *excuse*, her role in what amounts to the destruction of her own sister. It becomes important to begin her explanation by moving back to the generation of her grandparents for a variety of reasons. First, Iris wants to affirm that the Chases represent an "old family," in contrast to the hated and hateful Griffens whom she enjoys hearing dismissed at a social gathering as "arrivistes." Grandfather Chase may have made the family fortune in something as mundane as buttons, but he had the social good sense to marry into a family more established than his own, an expression of the hypergamy, or marrying up the social ladder, common in the nineteenth century as entrepreneurs often married the daughters of their social "betters." Iris's father took over the button business when he returned, battered, from the killing fields of the Great War his two brothers did not survive. A hollow man in the wasteland the war produced, Chase eventually lost the family fortune in his quixotic efforts to look after the interests of his workers in a world of depression and, more crucially, a world of change, in which buttons became not just mundane but unprofitable. Like her sister

Laura in a more dramatic manner, Iris depicts herself as a victim of her family fortunes and her society's construction of her as a woman in a patriarchal, increasingly *fascist* world.

Iris explains herself thus as a poor little rich girl, bred to be a society lady and therefore denied a meaningful education, her youth being merely an apprenticeship of patiently waiting for a man to choose her to dance with him through marriage and motherhood. Although the analogy is not evident on the novel's surface, Iris cannot have been unaware of Laura's and her resemblance on a minor scale to the "Little Princesses," one of whom was in training to become queen of the British Empire while the other waited as potential substitute. Because Mrs. Chase died of a miscarriage when the girls were young—perhaps this lost child was to be the son and heir who would manage the button-making, and later society's underwear as well—it was the girls' nanny, Reenie, who raised them. Like many traditional servants, Reenie is more socially conscious than her betters, and she schools Iris, in particular, in the necessity of always living according to the expectations of the townsfolk in Port Ticonderoga. A marvelous example of that schooling is demonstrated in the issues of how to dress for the annual picnic sponsored by the Chases, who invite literally the whole town to the celebration. The girls must not dress too well, for that would be seen as arrogant, especially during the Depression; however, they also could not dress too casually, for that would show contempt for the limited means of the townsfolk.

Because of her status Iris must not only dress for her social inferiors; she must also acknowledge that she has no real "identity" but is essentially a social construction, a text on which others may write their desire. And since hers is a patriarchal society, it goes without saying that all the "writers" are men. She is Daddy's little girl until Chase fails in business. Because it is impossible for him to be cruel to his workers by laying them off, he struggles to be kind by saving as many jobs as possible and eventually makes it unprofitable to employ any of them. This business failure feminizes him by making him powerless and therefore vulnerable, and he is forced to throw himself on the mercy of his largest business competitor, Richard Griffen. Or to be more accurate, Chase throws his daughter Iris to these wolves, not only the macho, fascist Richard but also his sister Winifred, modeled on the Wicked Witch of the West. Mr. Chase tells Iris that he and Griffen have talked about the prospective "merger," and although he would not *force* her to marry a man she chose not to, he is compelled to add

that if she demurs he will no longer have the means to maintain the status of either of his daughters as “ladies.” Trained to be a traditional woman who says, “Do whatever you will with me,” Iris at eighteen agrees to marry a man old enough to be her father and submits for years to his virtual rape in the marriage bed. It is crucial that the Iris who has been trained to dumb down her potential to think logically fails to put two and two together. Her father takes his own life when her husband betrays the “gentleman’s agreement” to spare the Chase workers in a merger—the agreement for which Iris’s body was the down payment—and she learns on returning from Europe that her husband tore up all of Reenie’s telegrams with the news of her father’s death so the honeymoon would not be spoiled for *her*. Furthermore, she bears Griffen’s sadistic sexual assaults, knowing his pleasure grows with his awareness that she feels nothing for him sexually, and yet she apparently fails to see that her husband, the crafty capitalist, has told her sister Laura in so many words: “Let’s make a deal! You submit to my raping you, and I will not reveal the whereabouts of your lover-boy, Alex Thomas.”

Iris Chase is not, of course, the first victim in Atwood’s fiction. One sister in victimage who comes to mind immediately is Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood’s dystopian vision of an American theocracy and patriarchy, in which “handmaids” could be coerced into becoming walking wombs for those in power who have lost their fertility through radioactive contamination. Like Iris, Offred takes a lover and produces a child, since her Commander could not. Iris is also reminiscent of Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye*, who submits to being tortured psychologically as well as physically by her preteen girlfriends, apparently because she feels she must have done something wrong to attract such sadistic treatment. In one of that novel’s most memorable images, Elaine begins flaying herself alive, so to speak, by peeling the skin off her feet. Her loving mother seems powerless to stop the abuse of her daughter, even though she suspects something horrible is taking place. There persists in Atwood’s writing the notion that evil will go on as long as good people fail to speak out against it. At the same time, Elaine is an important “sister” of Iris because, as even Elaine herself acknowledges, she develops a “mean mouth” as a young woman, almost as though her perception of earlier victimage authorizes verbal cruelty toward others. And finally, although Elaine as an adult voices a lack of anger and resentment toward her prime tormentor, Cordelia, it is open to question whether she forgives Cordelia or secretly hopes

that her childhood tormentor will roast in hell for eternity. Elaine is a graphic artist, rather than a writer, and yet her “texts” frequently are the products of that anger of the former victim, as she skewers women such as Mrs. Smeath, whom she once overheard acknowledging that Elaine was being tortured but deserved it. And these sisters in victimage point up the challenge for Iris in making her journey of the spirit toward transcendence: how to shed the victim’s crutch as well as the impulse to see one’s story as a revenger’s tragedy. Certainly, Iris is a victim with more than sufficient grounds to call down vengeance on her victimizers; unless she can rise above those subject positions of victim and revenging fury, however, she may never reach the peak toward which her spiritual journey is aimed.

The issues of victimization in *The Blind Assassin* raise questions concerning “sacrifice” in Iris’s narrative. One beginning of this theme is her father’s embitterment by the slaughterhouse of the Great War in which the idealism of young men was betrayed by the Old Gang of economic leaders, like Richard Griffen, squabbling over markets for their products, cheap labor, and economic hegemony, and all of it gilded over with the cant of a “place in the sun” and “saving civilization from the barbarians.” In the wasteland of smashed ideals following the war, Chase dedicates himself to a latter-day *noblesse oblige*, ultimately turning his misguided notions of self-sacrifice into the destruction of the very workers for whom he thought he was making that sacrifice. His suicide ought to have offered his daughters a huge object lesson in the futility of “sacrifice.”

In the end, however, both Laura and Iris are their father’s daughters. Iris depicts Laura as a pathetic, even inane, believer in the high ideals of self-sacrifice. As a child Laura almost drowns herself in a misguided bargain in which she offers up her life for the return of her dead mother from the beyond. Similarly, Laura naïvely believes that she can protect Alex Thomas by submitting to Richard’s sexual advances, even though, as Callista Fitzsimmons later suggests, Richard probably had no idea where Alex was hiding (503). After all, Richard is apparently not bright enough to figure out that his wife is having an affair and that Aimee may not be his own child, even though his more suspicious sister comments on how dark the baby’s hair is—unlike the hair of the Chases and Griffens but very much like Alex’s. Laura’s childish commitment to sacrifice—making bargains with God and Richard Griffen—deflects attention, however, from the fact that Iris is, more importantly, her father’s daughter.

Much of Iris's sense of victimage is implicit in her preoccupation with sacrifice. She wants very much to justify her willingness to marry Richard as an attempt to rescue the family fortunes. Accordingly, when she learns of her father's suicide, resulting from Richard's betrayal of the deal in which he bought her—at barely eighteen she was a “steal”—Iris thinks: “I'd married Richard for nothing, then—I hadn't saved the factories, and I certainly hadn't saved Father. But there was Laura, still; she wasn't out on the street” (314). (Even the circumstances of Mr. Chase's death entail a sacrifice of the truth, however, for the suicide has to be concealed, or else Laura would get nothing from her father's life insurance policy.) What Iris ignores, of course, is that Laura may be even less safe *off* the street and *in* the Griffen home or, as it turns out, on the *Water Nixie* where he first rapes her. How culpable is Iris for not suspecting Richard's designs on Laura? How culpable are we as readers for not figuring it out before Iris reveals the truth? Or is this surprise yet another bit of evidence that Iris is feeding us a line, or weaving a web, to snare her readers into acknowledging the difficulty of foreseeing the evil of the Richards of this world? To what degree was Iris unable to see Richard's perverse interest in Laura because of her own involvement with Alex Thomas? On at least one occasion, Iris indicates an awareness of Richard's infidelity but chooses to compartmentalize his vagrancy as the conventional sexual exploitation of secretaries by their bosses. Once again in the context of her journey of the spirit, how successful has Iris been in resisting the role of victim licensed by the cruelty of others and turning them into villains on whom she can call down the vengeance of the memoir writer?

The theme of sacrifice plays into Iris's predilection for tragedy, especially Shakespeare's later tragedies in which the innocent are often swept up in the bloodshed along with the evil. The staging of Richard's suicide offers a pastiche of *Macbeth*, the defeat of an ambitious tyrant's pursuit of political power, in this case, through the publication of Laura's fantasy novel, “The Blind Assassin,” to embarrass him socially. In a moment it becomes apparent that Iris's incredible performance of the role of a Patient Griselda from medieval lore has been her living out the cynical wisdom of the street that smart people “don't get angry, they get even.” But what are we to make of the revelation of her culpability in Laura's suicide? Like the evil stepmother Winifred, Richard plays out the fairy-tale role of a Bluebeard who is not content to marry a woman young enough to be his daughter but must also rape her even younger sister in a reworking of King Tereus and Philomela

from Greek mythology.²¹ However, even as the Greek myth suggests, Laura plays the role of God's fool, the innocent, whom Iris seems to carelessly destroy.

As I have argued in *Studies in the Novel*, one aspect of sacrifice in *The Blind Assassin* is its textual implication in "memorials" on several levels. Returning from the graveyard of ideals in Europe, Captain Chase is intent on defeating the Big Lie that the obscene destruction of young lives had any noble purpose. As a result, his struggle with the townsfolk over the war memorial defines this narrative's immersion in "memoirs" and other vehicles for memorializing the past. The war memorial also foregrounds this memorializing of "sacrifice" as a Chase legacy so that the Iris who is working through her past in these memoirs is her father's daughter. The narrative contains another memorial, this one to a Colonel Parkman, offering Iris the opening to suggest that who or what is being memorialized is only a reconstruction, since in this case no one knows what Parkman looked like. These monuments or memorials to those who have been lost in history's organized violence establish a context within which Iris will reconstruct the past, in the novel we hold in our hands, as a monument to her family's and her own tragedy.

This theme of reconstruction, stretching back at least to *The Handmaid's Tale*, grounds Atwood's sense of memoirs, or art itself, as always a reconstruction of the past for the conscious, and unconscious, purposes of the one who is doing the reconstructing. Once again this narrative could, like Lessing's novel, be called "Memoirs of a Survivor," because as the sole survivor of the older generations of the tragic Chase family, Iris is writing "history" to serve her own purposes. Iris has a counterpart in Briony Tallis of *Atonement*, Ian McEwan's uncannily similar tale. Briony is yet another novelist/narrator who speaks of how the artist plays God in reconstructing the past to serve a higher aesthetic, if not moral, purpose. Like Briony, Iris gives us the impression that members of her family, but especially Laura, represent the raw material for her art, and, as we have seen, writing can aspire to "truth" only when it is immediately erased. Although Iris is less blunt in celebrating the power of her text to establish the *only* "truth" to survive, she would subscribe to Briony's rather cavalier dismissal of the "real lives" of those she has survived when she asserts that "we will only exist in my inventions" (*Atonement* 350).

In a sense Iris is telling this story as a consolation for being unable to be a graphic artist. From its beginning this narrative has focused on

a single photographic image—Alex and Iris in love, Laura with only her hand stretching into the frame of the photograph. As Iris reveals, she wrote the novel-within-the-novel, another story called “The Blind Assassin,” as a memorial to Alex. She wrote the story because she could not recover the happiness of the Eden in the photograph, representing in its simple and unpretentious way what she aimed at preserving once she discovered Alex was forever lost to her. She writes: “The picture is of happiness, the story is not. Happiness is a garden walled with glass: there’s no way in or out. In Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys. It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road” (518). In this way the story reaches out to embrace, perhaps even to precipitate, the suffering that makes stories possible. Were it possible for us to enter the glass-walled garden of the photograph, there would no longer be any need for stories. We would have reached the blessed still-point where journeys end.

At the same time, this story is that glass-walled garden into which Iris has allowed her readers to peer. From the outset readers have noted the implications of the name of this “Iris” who is an “eye” as well as an “I.” In the act setting the story in motion, Laura may be troped as having passed through the looking glass with Iris’s self-revelation that she, not Laura, had been Alex’s beloved. Tragic art demands just such sacrifices, it would seem. Iris lived out her own life as a survivor in the wasteland of a world from which love had been eradicated. The drunkenness, the sexual promiscuity, the empty days—all are part of her tragic gesture of sacrifice to what had vanished with Alex’s death, and then Laura’s. In the closing pages Iris herself is about to pass through the glass she has spent a lifetime looking at and attempting to penetrate with envy and longing.²²

The circumstances of her dying are central to Atwood’s very earthly construction of spiritual adventure. It bears repeating that Iris is a pioneer in embodying the challenge of making art as an old woman, struggling against the recognition of the muck with which the human heart is filled—a dark recognition of hatred and spite and grief and despair with the power to paralyze a weaker spirit that could barely glimpse the promised land of a journey’s end with its promise of rest for a decrepit body and a troubled soul. It is appropriate to her unwillingness to idealize this defining moment of her spiritual journey that Iris notes, “*The end*, a warm safe haven,” but she adds that in the distance is a “postwar motel, where no questions are asked and none of

the names in the front-desk register are real and it's cash in advance." She invokes the Furies in a particularly modern sense of heroic effort: "Guide my shaking arthritic fingers, my tacky black ballpoint pen; keep my leaking heart afloat for just a few more days, until I can set things in order." Then implicating herself in the answer to the question, Who is the Blind Assassin?²³ Iris confesses that in the beginning she "wanted only justice. I thought my heart was pure," but eventually she recognized the appropriateness of justice being troped as a woman blindfolded with a sword, "a pretty good recipe for cutting yourself" (497), and *others*, we might add, since the novel Iris has been writing is her *Atonement*, or "confession," in the service of her desire for forgiveness.

The passage from which the citations above have been excerpted has the imagistic density of poetry, and one more citation must be made before moving to the closing scene of the novel, as Iris's storytelling and her life end with an eerie sense of synchronicity. Iris invokes her spiritual mother, Reenie, who often taught her an everyday philosophical truism: "All things have their place," a statement that "in a fouler mood" Reenie troped as "*No flowers without shit*" on her way to justifying the darker side of the human heart she had exposed. "A well-wrought invocation to the Furies can come in handy, in case of need. When it's primarily a question of revenge" (497). Important as this confession of revenge may be, it is the qualifier "well-wrought" that ought to signal yet another provenance for the tragedy called *The Blind Assassin*—John Donne's poem "The Canonization," in which the persona posits the efficacy of the sonnet to hold mighty truths, "As well a well-wrought urn becomes / The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs."²⁴ Clearly, Iris has been fashioning this narrative as the "urn" containing not only her family's remains but her own as well. In the end the Donne poem signals Iris's accommodation of the sacred with the profane, the spirit's journey toward transcendence with the "fury and the mire of human veins," or, as Reenie so inelegantly suggested, *No flowers without shit*.

That accommodation of the sacred and the profane is grounded in the narrator's death scene in spring—the narration almost without our awareness having completed a year's cycle from its beginning with a school commencement ceremony. It is a warm, rainy evening, with Iris sitting in her garden, enjoying the wild phlox in bloom, or what she *believes* may be phlox, since she can no longer see very well. She is awash in the odor of "moist dirt and fresh growth," and she adds: "It

smells like youth; it smells like heartbreak” (520). Unlike others perhaps on the threshold of death, Iris appears not to have severed the ties with the living who expose the heart to pain, for she ends with a vision of her heart’s desire—Sabrina appearing at the last moment and offering not love or forgiveness but only the ear of a listener. In the end Iris needs only the atonement of art, the simplest form of which may be the duo of a storyteller and her listener. It is left to the novel’s readers in the world outside this glass-walled garden to reassure themselves that Sabrina may have fulfilled her grandmother’s wish, for someone has to have gathered up “this jumbled mound of paper” beside Iris’s dead body and overseen its publication as the book we readers hold in our own hands. The death notice indicates that Sabrina “has just returned from abroad and is expected to visit this town shortly to see to her grandmother’s affairs” (519). The contaminated but ultimately heroic spirit of Iris has arrived at journey’s end and demonstrated the author’s pioneering efforts at confirming the possibility of the older woman’s pursuit of spiritual transcendence.²⁵

This is, however, no immaculate and high-flown spiritual adventure that Iris has been involved in. It reeks of the rank aroma of wild phlox and the mire sustaining those flowers. It is a triumph of the spirit contaminated with the painful desire of remembered youth and the impatience with pretense and hypocrisy of those who, like Iris, are packing the hope chest of their futures with the few memorials to their having been briefly in this world as they ready themselves for a beyond in which their crimes and misdemeanors may be understood and perhaps even forgiven. As indicated earlier, “Atonement” might have served Atwood’s purposes well as a title for this spiritual journey. Increasingly, Iris seems to be writing these “memoirs” for her granddaughter, reaching out from the beyond to seek understanding and perhaps even forgiveness for her failures, if not her sins. Within the logical framework of a text Iris apparently left in handwritten manuscript, the very fact of the text’s existence as a book in print would argue that *someone* found the manuscript and directed the process of its publication. Is it sentimental to grasp at the possibility that it was Sabrina who chose to preserve this record of her family history, this testament of faith Iris created as her final voyage out, like Tennyson’s Ulysses, acknowledging the obstacles and resisting the comforts of old age’s reduced expectations and choosing to make this last heroic gesture toward understanding and trust in the compassion of others? Perhaps the old, if anyone, have a right to be sentimental.

Notes

1. As I have argued in my essay “Engendering Metafiction: Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*,” Atwood has had an interest in the whodunit at least since *Alias Grace*, in which she subverts that genre’s easy confidence that the truth can be established within a framework built on the elimination of “reasonable doubt.”

2. See Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*.

3. See Roland Barthes’s *S/Z*.

4. Freud’s familiarity with the Sherlock Holmes stories is well known. The implication of Freudian psychoanalysis in the detective story is apparent in Nicholas Meyer’s fantasy novel and film, *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, in which Watson tricks Holmes into traveling to Vienna to be cured of his cocaine addiction by Sigmund Freud, who adopts Holmes’s method of detection for his own work in tracking the origins of neuroses in his analysands’ life stories as part of the “talking cure.”

5. At the end of his last major poem, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.”

6. While working on Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement* (2002), I was excited by similarities between that novel and *The Blind Assassin*: both have very old female novelists attempting to achieve atonement through the writing of family memoirs in which they reveal how they destroyed a sister’s possibility for love. Then I discovered that John Updike had “scooped” me in his excellent review of *Atonement*.

7. See Peter Brooks’s provocative discussion of the novel and privacy in *Body Works*.

8. In the poem “The Tower.” Elsewhere, the older Yeats tropes the body as a “tattered coat upon a stick” (“Sailing to Byzantium”) or “a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (“Among School Children”).

9. Atwood may have thought about the instance of her “foremother,” Virginia Woolf, dying before she had completed the revisions of her posthumously published novel, *Between the Acts*. While working on *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood would have been just about the age that Woolf was when she left *Between the Acts* uncompleted.

10. Although she eschews “theory,” Atwood might support the notion of the Death of the Author in the limited sense that the Author exists only during the writing of a particular text and “dies” with its completion, as Iris literally does in this novel. The second chapter of *Negotiating with the Dead* contains Atwood’s provocative troping of the Author as the doubles Jekyll and Hyde, Jekyll being the Author who signs books and grants interviews, while Hyde, on the other side of the looking glass, to mix metaphors, is the Author writing. Or, to be more precise, the site of writing is the looking glass itself, the narrow space that Jekyll and Hyde jointly occupy during composition.

11. Roberta Rubenstein has commented that “Atwood is a fiendishly clever manipulator of the reader’s knowledge” (234).

12. A fascinating analog for Iris’s/Atwood’s decision to begin the novel she is narrating with the grandparents’ generation is offered by D. H. Lawrence’s two greatest novels. Lawrence had written a draft for the novel eventually to become

Women in Love when he decided that his protagonist, Ursula Brangwen, needed a “past” before she settled with Rupert Birkin as her life partner. He wrote a draft of the youth of Ursula’s parents and, still unsatisfied, drafted the story of Ursula’s maternal grandparents, producing *The Rainbow*, the long “prequel” to the novel he originally planned, developing the “present,” before Ursula meets Birkin. Starting with the grandparents makes good sense psychologically, since most of us have at best dim memories of great-grandparents.

13. Yeats in “Byzantium.”

14. The classic example of the manuscript’s vulnerability occurs in Henrik Ibsen’s play *Hedda Gabler*. After her former lover Lövborg leaves with her his manuscript describing his vision of how civilization might be transformed, Hedda stuffs it into the stove and Lövborg takes his own life.

15. Iris seems to literalize writing with the body when she indicates an unwillingness to have a “woman” come in to do her laundry: “All those tatters, those crumpled fragments, like shed white skins. Though not entirely white. A testament to something: blank pages my body’s been scrawling on, leaving its cryptic evidence as it slowly but surely turns itself inside out” (367–68).

16. It must be added here that the body also represents a “text” in Iris’s narrative, as she later reveals that Richard’s sexual practices include deliberately bruising her body in areas publicly covered with clothing, as though he were marking it as a territory like a conquistador laying claim to new territories for his possession.

17. Ironically, “at the outset” belies the fact that this passage occurs late in the text, after Iris apparently has recognized the lack of “truth” in her text.

18. One of Zeno’s most famous paradoxes involved the impossibility of a runner #1 overtaking runner #2 because #1 would always be able to cover no more than a fraction of the distance separating him from #2.

19. Since this essay was first drafted, Atwood has published *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*.

20. See my “Engendering Metafiction.”

21. See Sharon Wilson’s excellent study of Atwood’s use of fairy-tale motifs.

22. This looking-glass trope has its origins in Atwood’s provocative metaphorizing of the relationship between the halves of the Jekyll/Hyde figure of the Author. As indicated above, the essence of the composing process is the narrow space of glass in which Jekyll, the public Author, meets Hyde, the composing Author, during the composition process.

23. Reviewers of the novel have leapt into the breach opened by Atwood’s figure of the Blind Assassin. Barbara Mujica speculates that the Blind Assassin is time, which ends up doing everyone in, the good as well as the evil.

24. It is hardly a coincidence that the renowned New Critic Cleanth Brooks analyzed the John Donne poem in a classic example of “close reading” in his book *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Furthermore, in Atwood’s novel *Oryx and Crake*, the viewpoint character Jimmy/Snowman mentions Donne (167). Because Jimmy was an English major, his consciousness is full of literary allusions: he thinks, for example, of “gods cavorting with willing nymphs on some golden-age Grecian frieze” (169). Keats may not have invented the modifier “Grecian”; however, for most readers it has become associated with *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

25. Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* offers yet another performance of the aging, disintegrating viewpoint character as one of the last (if not *the* last) human beings in a futuristic world populated by genetically engineered humanoid beings. This character Jimmy/Abominable Snowman is a former English major turned advertising man, deprived of Iris's gratification in writing her "memoirs of a survivor" by the cruel reality of the children of Crake who will inherit the earth being unable to read.

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CHAPTER 5



“And They Went to Bury Her”

*Margaret Atwood’s The Blind Assassin
and The Robber Bride*

DEBRAH RASCHKE

AND

SARAH APPLETON

At the end of *Cat’s Eye*, protagonist Elaine characterizes the old women she admires on the plane “laughing like on gravel” as women who are “amazingly carefree”: “They’re rambunctious, they’re full of beans; they’re tough as thirteen, they’re innocent and dirty, they don’t give a hoot. Responsibilities have fall away from them, obligations, old hates, and grievances; now for a short while they can play again like children, but this time without the pain” (444–45). Yet Atwood’s aging female characters are often those who have not yet learned how to disengage themselves from pain; they undergo late-life quests into the past to encounter the anguish that has inhibited their growth. Atwood’s aging female characters are often engaged in pivotal searches for identity that necessitate a retrospective evaluation, one that invariably proffers an inner adventure. Yet the ultimate “answers” are not always positive or affirming. Iris in *The Blind Assassin* reinterprets and perhaps even reinvents the past. She subverts her pain by denying its source and mitigating her own complicity. In contrast, in *The Robber Bride*, the quest belongs not to the bad girl but to those who confront her, including the reader.

Atwood’s writing has always reflected the allure of the bad girl. This bad girl, as many have noted, cannot be easily exorcized to some no-man’s-land where her influence becomes contained and minimized. She

is a constant presence, inseparable from us, like the dove in Coleridge's "Christabel" whose breath becomes indistinguishable from the breath of the snake that has coiled around its neck. She cannot, as Charis suggests of Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, "be meditated out of existence" (75). Karen Stein, in her analysis of Zenia, notes: "When she is supposedly dead, she returns to life again. When she is cremated for the (seemingly) second time, the jar containing her ashes cracks as it is being thrown into the water" (99). Extending Zenia's otherness to a global perspective, Coral Ann Howells sees Zenia as an incarnation of the "diseases, neuroses, and traumas which are buried in the foundations of Western culture." She is a postwar immigrant, a victim of the Holocaust, sexual abuse, AIDS, sexual violence, and drug addiction. She represents, in other words, "the festering cancers that scar Western society and the suppression of their memory" (149). She is everywhere, and, however she is configured, her boundaries reach far beyond her body and her narrative.¹

Zenia and Iris as character types are no strangers to Atwood's fiction. They have numerous predecessors. In concocting fictions of their pasts, Zenia and Iris resemble what Barbara Hill Rigney identifies in her discussion of *Alias Grace* as the "woman as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider who becomes one with the image of the tale-teller writer." The motif is familiar in much of Atwood's fiction: artist/protagonist/witch who is "capable of casting spells" and who is "on trial for witchcraft if not murder" (158, 163). As tale-teller and shifter of stories, they recall Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, who always insists that her story is a "reconstruction." Both Zenia and Iris also exemplify the allure of the defiant, who-gives-a-damn bad girl. They are sexually free Katherine-Kath-Kat-K who would not think twice about coating her preserved ovarian cyst in chocolate and sending it to the lover who abandoned her. She does as she pleases, heedless of what others may think of her. They are Moira of *The Handmaid's Tale*, who, in defiance of the right-wing fundamentalist Republic of Gilead, binds Aunt Elizabeth to the toilet seat, steals her clothes, and swaggers out of the fundamentalist compound.² Zenia extends the character composite even further. In her not-quite death, she bears kin to Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*, who "[plans] her death carefully," giving up her traditional life—"years of murdered breakfasts"—to escape into multiple lives, multiple identities, and reckless pleasure (*Lady Oracle* 3–7). Zenia, too, bears resemblance to Lucy in "Death by Landscape," who, as the more dazzling of the Lucy-Lois pair, breaks the rules, spurns the

other's opinions, and, in an act of rebellion, burns her sanitary napkin. And like Lucy, her presence, even in her absence, is pervasive.³

Iris, *The Blind Assassin's* narrator, is rather like a blend of Elaine Risley and Cordelia from *Cat's Eye*. That is, instead of projecting her anger and insecurity onto another character, an evil twin, Iris is allowed the complexity of being both the insecure victim and the insecure victimizer. She is, after all, compared to a *blind* assassin, not just to a cunning, malevolent assassin. Or she is like Tony from *The Robber Bride*, who is able to act out some of her fantasies as Tnomerf Ynot, rather than just projecting them onto Zenia. Although she remains willfully blind to the extent of her complicity in her sister Laura's death, clues in the text suggest her ambiguous nature.⁴

Iris bears a marked resemblance to some of the more unflattering depictions of Guinevere from the Arthurian legends. As Atwood makes reference to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Iris is associated with the deceitful and adulterous queen in some portrayals, as well as the innocent victim in others. And as in William Morris's "Defence of Guenevere," she, too, insists that her accusers are erroneous in their pronouncements against her: "Nevertheless you lie" is her persistent response when confronted with the evidence of her betrayal of Arthur. Similar to the poem's queen, who flirts with surreptitiously admitting the truth while denying the interpretation, Iris acknowledges the actual events from her past but argues against the interpretations of her intent. Yes, Iris/Guinevere does have an adulterous affair with Alex/Lancelot betraying Richard/Arthur and destroying any possible romance of Laura/Elaine with Alex. And yes, Iris/Guinevere can be held partially accountable for the death of Laura/Elaine; however, Iris affirms that her affair is justified and that Laura has maintained unrealistic illusions, or as it may be according to Iris, delusions. Yet Iris would also have her readers—and perhaps herself—believe that it was she who was the Elaine, not her sister. She would like us to see her as Elaine (or Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott") who spent her lonely days weaving a vision of the world she is forbidden to enjoy while being barred from her rightful lover.

Iris bears kinship with Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, who embarks upon a memoir of her past. Yet Elaine, while also depicting herself as victimized, ultimately acknowledges her own retaliatory torment that she inflicts on Cordelia. After the trials of her childhood, Elaine reveals her subsequent treatment of the now-weakened girl. As Cordelia's power has been eradicated, Elaine gloats over her own "mean mouth" and

her cavalier behavior with the troubled Cordelia. In the end, Elaine laments the loss of her "twin," regretting the lack of reconciliation. Iris, however, overtly refuses to bear adequate responsibility for her actions. While she must admit having a part in the tragedy of Laura's death, Iris attempts to maintain the posture of innocence.

Iris is also kin to Serena Joy in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a woman resentful of her aging, a woman whose potential freedom to enjoy her age and acquired wisdom has been thwarted by the very community she strove to create. By watching the videotapes of her earlier evangelical self, Serena Joy validates that she was, in fact, a vital part of the social change in which she is now trapped—in other words, she has made her own bed.⁵ However, the narration of Iris in *The Blind Assassin* seems less of a spiritual retrospection to articulate the truth—even if it is painful—than a clever and maybe desperate fabrication in an attempt to perpetuate the myth she has created. Rather than reminiscing with angry resignation like Serena Joy, Iris is determined to present her version, her history.

In the present time of her narration, Iris is an elderly woman, antagonistic and alienated. Her days are marked by a daily proprietary trek to the button factory—once possessed by her father—and an internal diatribe directed toward those individuals, both alive and dead, who may have cared for her. Iris measures her life by how much pain she is still capable of inflicting, from her incomprehensible sneering at Walter and Myra,⁶ who seem to be under no obligation to Iris, to her passionate self-defense in regard to her treatment of her adoring sister Laura. For example, in an acerbic yet funny admission, Iris recounts with relish her rudeness to the disciples of Laura. One of her responses to inquiries about obtaining Laura's letters reads as follows: "Dear Miss W., In my view your plan for a 'Commemoration Ceremony' at the bridge which was the scene of Laura Chase's tragic death is both tasteless and morbid. You must be out of your mind. I believe you are suffering from auto-intoxication. You should try an enema" (286). Iris recounts, "For years I took grim satisfaction in this venomous doodling" (287). Iris spares no one, not her lawyer, not her family, and not the people she sees on the street. Her narration, then, is more than suspect. As James Held asserts, Iris's tale "brims with suspense and pathos, horrendous betrayals and monstrous lies" ("Sisters").

Certainly, definitions of the postmodern literary tend to include recognition of the aspects of any narrator's inherent unreliability. Brian McHale, among others, posits that postmodern-era authors capitalize

on readers' acceptance of blatant misdirection in narrative and their unwillingness to discredit the authority of the narrator. Atwood, however, inverts this phenomenon, forcing readers, in fact, to question Iris's authority. That is, although Iris attempts to manipulate her text to elicit sympathy from the readers, the readers find they must resist the perhaps natural tendency to identify with the narrator. Iris's bid for absolution falters as the readers cannot suspend skepticism.

That Iris is an unreliable narrator is more than obvious. However, unlike a traditional unreliable narrator, such as Nick Carraway in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, who appears to be convinced of the validity of his rendition of Jay Gatsby's romantic nobility, Iris's legitimate conviction of the veracity of her version of the events—as well as her motive for the narration itself—is highly questionable. Just as Laura argues that her “enhancements” of the photographs' faces demonstrate the “colours” of the subjects' “souls” (“It's the colours they *ought* to have been in” [194]), *The Blind Assassin's* readers become aware that Iris is narrating the story in the colors in which she would like it to be presented. She writes, “Most people prefer a past in which nothing smells” (52). But, as Roberta Rubenstein recognizes, Iris can be “duplicitous,” “self-serving and untrustworthy” (236).

Contrary to attempting an honestly objective viewpoint, Iris presents her version to depict herself in a more flattering tone; she exhibits little of Zenia's devil-may-care-if-I-am-a-bad-girl demeanor, although often her bad-girl persona is irrepressible. Iris's goal involves ignoring the exterior appearance of her behavior while, paradoxically, presenting an exterior narrative that is “colored” with her contradictory assessments. Molly Hite recognizes that the plot is propelled by “the need to understand Laura, or to understand how Iris understands Laura” (1). And while Iris's memoir is, in part, her ostensible attempt to explain Laura's mysterious death, there are other strategies informing the narrative. Iris may also be seen as surreptitiously bragging about her unnoticed victories, while maintaining the appearance of victimization. The very last portion of the first chapter contains Iris's justification: “But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling” (2). Questioning the prospect that her memory is tainted by rhetorically asking, “is what I remember the same thing as what actually happened?” Iris tellingly responds by stating, “It is now: I am the only survivor” (217–18). Iris initially maintains that the only way she can write the truth is to assume that what she writes will never be read, yet she admits, “At the very least we

want a witness. We can't stand the idea of our own voices falling silent finally, like a radio running down" (95), tacitly acknowledging that she does in fact anticipate an audience.⁷ Thus, early in the novel, the unnamed woman in one of *The Blind Assassin's* three intertwined narratives complains to her storytelling lover who has reacted to her objections by promising to "rewrite history"; she states: "You can't,[.] . . . The word has gone forth. You can't cancel half a line of it" (30). However, Iris, in writing/revising the prevailing version of history—for example, subverting in her memoir the public's assumption that Laura Chase has written the novel—clearly indicates that history can indeed be rewritten, undermined, reconceptualized.

Many reviewers of the novel, while acknowledging certain narrative sleight of hand, have tended to absolve Iris of purely malicious intent. For example, Ann Janine Morey sees Iris as a "typical" Atwood narrator: "a bewildered cynical female narrator [who] senses the horror of her own spiritual emptiness" (28). Likewise, Brenda Wineapple describes Iris as a woman who was "taught self-effacement, obedience, modesty and quiescence" (58). Yet she also asserts that Iris is a "woman without affect who nightly accedes to her husband's savagery, insulates herself from her sister's suffering and refuses to see the incest and adultery and suicide committed before her eyes. Yes, yes, she is a kind of blind assassin, cutthroat and complex, herself a wounded child impassively doing what she has to do" (59). As the blind assassin of the novel, Iris and her killing story are imported with both invention and destruction. Furthermore, Iris's tale contains certain clues that she has positioned herself in the middle of some romantic fairy tale. Most tellingly, her recitation of her married life is remarkably similar to her childhood fantasies about Adelia, her long-dead grandmother. Iris writes that Adelia was "married off" to "money—crude money, button money. She was expected to refine this money, like oil" (59).⁸ Iris further remembers, "I used to romanticize Adelia. I would gaze out of my window at night, over the lawns and the moon-silvered bed of ornamentals, and see her trailing through the grounds in a white lace tea gown. I gave her a languorous, world-weary, faintly mocking smile. Soon I added a lover" (60). When recounting how the house—Avilion—was named, Iris believes that Adelia's choice of King Arthur's death place signified "how hopelessly in exile she considered herself to be" (61). Finally, Iris admits that she and Laura were "brought up" by Adelia: "inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be" (62). As Iris's own marriage was a marriage of

commerce, she claimed to have had a lover, and she, too, portrays a life of “exile,” the similarities of both suggest her indoctrination by Adelia. However, Iris’s feelings of entrapment also suggest how disillusioned she has become with her earlier fantasies.

Iris’s tinting of herself as the victim is prevalent throughout the novel. She describes herself as one of the sheep who are “so dumb they jeopardize themselves, and get stuck on cliffs or cornered by wolves” (243). Yet this depiction hardly rings completely true when compared with other descriptions of herself as conniving and rebellious. In particular, her description of herself in the novel-within-the-novel “The Blind Assassin” as a young woman who lies and steals contrasts markedly with the naïve and silent new wife who endures her husband’s brutality and suffers through her sister-in-law Winifred’s manipulations. And although Iris presents herself as a victim, enduring a virtually loveless existence, her frequent protestations of caring for her sister are often undercut by her depictions of events.

This is not to say, however, that Iris’s intentions are without some mitigating factors; she often acknowledges her ambivalence and her ambiguous purposes. While Zenia in *The Robber Bride* is clearly weaving webs of lies to ensnare her victims and provoke confrontation, Iris often reflects upon her confusion. In describing the photograph of herself as a child and Laura as an infant that resided on her mother’s night table, Iris sees her own “accusing” and angry expression and wonders, “Was I angry because I’d been told to hold the baby, or was I in fact defending it? Shielding it—reluctant to let it go?” (85). Yet she also concedes that she and Laura were engaged in battle. With distinct irritation, after her mother has voiced her dying wish that Iris be a “good sister,”⁹ she asks, “I felt I was a victim of injustice: why was it me who was supposed to be a good sister to Laura, instead of the other way around?” She reflects that her mother’s love for both sisters “was a given—solid and tangible, like a cake. The only question was which one of us was going to get the bigger slice” (93).

Iris complains, “I didn’t know that I was about to be left with [my mother’s] idea of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned onto me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at her” (94). Feeling bound by her mother’s request, Iris maintains the front of dutiful sister. However, Iris trains herself to exploit the art of miscommunication and misdirection, and the narrative often reveals Iris’s desire to hide or distort the truth. Iris learns early the power of such “tinting.” She notes that when she and Laura were little, they would shift their “dull grey oatmeal”

into the pools of colored light made as the sun came through a stained-glass window, making it "magic food, either charmed or poisoned depending on my whim or Laura's mood" (99). Likewise, when writing of her supposedly sadistic and pedophilic tutor, Mr. Erskine, she allows, "in addition to lying and cheating, I'd learned half-concealed insolence and silent resistance. I'd learned that revenge is a dish best eaten cold. I'd learned not to get caught" (167).

It becomes increasingly obvious that Iris maintains a certain amount of animosity toward her sister. When Laura was a child, Iris remembers following Laura and pushing her to the ground on the day of their mother's funeral, and how she enjoyed Laura's crying: "I wanted her to suffer too—as much as me. I was tired of her getting away with being so young" (97). Her resentment toward Laura—whom she even subtly accuses of being responsible for their mother's death—continues throughout the novel, culminating, of course, with her brutal revelation that she and Alex were lovers, a revelation and sisterly betrayal that may have caused Laura to commit suicide.¹⁰

Just as Zenia is both other and doubled self to Tony, Charis, and Roz, so, too, are Iris and Laura both opposite and alike. Michiko Kakutani writes, "it soon becomes clear that [Iris and Laura] are alter egos of sorts—doppelgangers and soul mates" ("Three Stories"). Alex's treatment of the sisters exemplifies their otherness: whereas he calls the fourteen-year-old Laura "a saint in training" (212)¹¹ while he is hiding at Avilion, he is sexually provocative toward Iris, kissing her and unbuttoning her blouse. In Iris's accounts, the sisters could not be more different. Laura is ethereal; Iris is solid flesh (which bruises). Laura is socially conscious; Iris is materially conscious. Laura is a dreamer; Iris is "practical" (212). Laura yearns for Alex's soul; Iris wants his body. Laura is Mary, and Iris is Martha (216).

Yet Alex, too, apparently recognizes their likeness to each other. In telling Iris the story of the Peach Women of Planet Aa'A, Alex recounts a tale of men's idea of perfect women: "One was a sexpot; the other was more serious-minded and could discuss art, literature, and philosophy, not to mention theology." Clearly, Alex is describing first Iris, then Laura. Yet he also claims, "The girls seemed to know which was required of them at any given moment, and would switch around according to the moods and inclinations" of the men (353–54). Alex, in his own tinted storytelling, seems to be warning Iris that perfectly accommodating women can be "tedious" and irritating; ultimately the male protagonists of the story wish to escape, even though their

apparent paradise offers them the granting of every desire. Alex hints that Iris and Laura are too much alike in their need and care for him, a need, perhaps, born out of competition.

As Iris and Laura are doubles or mirrored images of each other, Iris measures who she is by what is lacking in Laura. If Laura is “good,” then she is evil. But Iris has a way of making “goodness” seem eccentric or false: “Don’t misunderstand me,” she states, “I am not scoffing at goodness, which is far more difficult to explain than evil, and just as complicated. But sometimes it’s hard to put up with” (366). If Laura is altruistic in gritty and needy situations, Iris participates in charity work at superficial costume balls. If Laura is challenged by the meaning of language, Iris claims to be accepting of what is said to her and only questions the validity of language after it has been proven false.¹² Iris’s antithetical behavior, then, reflects her ambivalence and resentment toward Laura.

But Iris, taught “concealment,” cannot provoke confrontation. Instead, she enacts revenge under cover, much as she writes *The Blind Assassin* under Laura’s name. Iris is well aware of Laura’s feelings for Alex, and she blatantly ignores the strength of Laura’s devotion—not only to Alex but also to herself in her quest to renounce Laura. Iris tints the reader’s perceptions of Laura, making her appear vague and eccentric at best, insane at worst. Yet, at many times during the novel, Laura appears to be quite astute—even worldlier than Iris, such as when she instructs Iris on what to expect on her wedding night. Tragically, Iris is never able to totally recognize herself in Laura and vice versa. Although she comments on their similarities—acknowledging, for example, that both are “too secretive for charm, or else too blunt” (233), she continues to insist upon their irreconcilable differences. Both have, of course, been orphaned and need to rely upon each other. Yet, more than the lack of parents, both share the need for connection, acceptance, and growth beyond their present states. Iris gives us a fleeting vision of their unity when they share a moment after their father’s death: “We went straight up to Laura’s room and sat down on her bed. We held on tightly to each other’s hands—left in right, right in left” (313). This union is particularly poignant given that the photographs they have of themselves with Alex contain the severed hand of the other sister.

Clues to the “true” events are most liberal in the narrative within a narrative, “The Blind Assassin,” published with Laura named as author. Readers may speculate that Iris, armed with the power of ano-

nymity, feels comfortable enough not to overly protest her innocence. During one of the lovers' trysts, Iris, as the unnamed woman, boasts, "It's not my heart that's bloody, it's my mind. I'm bloody-minded. Or so I've been told" (131). And thus, Laura, not Iris, is the "victim" of the novel, and unlike Tony, Charis, and Roz, she dies instead of transcending the betrayal to which she is subjected. One could say that the novel has two victims, the blind assassin and the one she kills. In this way it is a more complex rendering of the ability to hurt than the earlier novel, as we come to understand and eventually empathize with both the victim and the perpetrator.

Iris's failure to resolve her ambivalence or to truthfully and completely admit to her behaviors in the past may then be due to her polarized ways of thinking. If, like her father's legs—one of which is "good" and one injured and therefore "bad"—Iris has been viewing herself and Laura as mirrored images of each other, then Iris has become trapped in a detrimental mode of assessing the past. In Laura's Latin notebook, Iris finds a translation of the goddess Iris freeing grief-stricken Dido's soul from her body with death. Laura is clearly absolving Iris from her betrayal. But, unlike Tony, Charis, and Roz, who actively work to reconnect their severed selves and accept both the positive and negative aspects of those selves, Iris often rejects the possibility of spiritual becoming. She admits as much in the final passages: "But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured. Endured and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge" (508).

Atwood suggests that age does not necessarily endow one with wisdom, character, or spirituality. The specter of impending death does not automatically release the urge to confess, atone, and cleanse. Iris manifests only few and late signs of resigned regret, acceptance, or regenerated wisdom. And unlike Tony, Charis, and Roz, who deny complicity with Zenia and refuse to allow pain and anger to dominate their remaining lives, Iris can only wonder, "How lost to myself I have become" (298).

It is only in the few remaining pages that Iris suggests her own part in Laura's tragedy, and she does so only after deciding to leave the manuscript to Sabrina. Iris's own admission is belated. She relates: "I did believe, at first, that I only wanted justice. I thought my heart was pure. We do like to have such good opinions of our own motives when we're about to do something harmful, to someone else" (497). In a sense, although Iris is unable to embrace the truth completely,

she offers Sabrina the “chance to reinvent” herself at will by proposing multiple versions of Sabrina’s parentage to choose from (513). Given the possible interpretations of the narrative, Sabrina may choose her grandmother—Iris or Laura, as Laura has claimed to be Aimee’s mother, her baby switched at birth to replace Iris’s possibly dead baby. She might also choose her grandfather—Alex or Richard, as both may have had sexual relations with each of the sisters. In other words, she attempts to free Sabrina from the kind of fixed role Iris has felt to be imposed upon herself. In this way, although she has rejected a spiritual journey of her own, she acts as spiritual guide to Sabrina by giving her the power of choice, a choice she felt was denied to her.

In *The Robber Bride*, one aspect of the spiritual journey—the confrontation, acceptance, and, most importantly, self-recognition of otherness—is readily apparent. This encounter with the other is how most critics read the *tour de force* that ensues when Zenia’s life collides with those of Tony, Charis, and Roz. Jennifer Enos notes that Zenia is the composite of each of their names (14).¹³ Karen Stein sees her as a “shadow self, a mirror of the darker side, the hidden anxieties of each character” (99). Indeed, Zenia does mirror the three women she betrays. The question then becomes, what do Tony, Roz, and Charis learn from this confrontation with otherness? What knowledge do they gain from this lethal quest in which the café that sets the novel in motion is an anagram for Quixote (ibid. 98)? Phyllis Sternberg Perakis sees Zenia as providing an “intersubjective space” in which each of the characters learns to heal: Tony, in her exchanges with Zenia, discovers the pleasures of sharing her “inner world” with others; Charis, in providing physical nurture to Zenia, learns the importance of her own bodily needs; and Roz, in finding a deeper acceptance of her parents, learns to accept herself more fully. All three learn “some new ways to navigate the in-between space that separates and joins us to the other” (167). For Lynn Bloom and Veronica Makowsky, Zenia is a “feminist avenger” who teaches the trio “to take charge of their lives” (170). Donna Potts sees the three women gaining independence from a colonized and patriarchal identity and, in the process, refusing the phallogocentric “impulse to dichotomize” (297), while Shannon Hengen interprets Zenia as a means of escaping imprisoning relationships. Sonia Mycak sees Zenia, in spite of her nastiness, as an avenue toward a more liberated consciousness. For J. Brooks Bouson, Zenia is a mirror to “repressed” and “outlawed emotions” that enable a metamorphosis from victim to survivor (150), and for Sarah Appleton

Aguilar, Zenia is a conduit for rediscovering the repressed "bitch," for integrating "rejected qualities" into a previously split and attenuated self (132)¹⁴ As Sharon Wilson notes in Margaret Atwood's *Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, Atwood has repeatedly resisted making the Good Woman tantamount to passivity, refusing to split images of the Great Mother into the "positive mother and the destructive witch" (17).¹⁵ This is especially true in her treatment of Zenia. Associated with the moon in a tarot reading for Charis, seen by Tony as "glowing" like the moon, and associated with destructive blood from the slaughter of Charis's chickens, Zenia embodies the Destroyer aspect of the Triple Goddess. Her rage stems from her amputation—patriarchal society's refusal to acknowledge the creative and the destructive as existing simultaneously in the mother figure (see Wilson, *Sexual Politics*). Or, one might add, her rage is the result of her suppression and control by patriarchal hermeneutics. She becomes that which has produced her: sheer power.

Zenia, not unsurprisingly, inspires envy: she is reckless, excessively beautiful, and free from the tyranny of others' perceptions. As Jean Wyatt notes, Zenia is the Lacanian real, "that which exceeds the symbolic order, that which no signifier can represent, that which those inside the symbolic order are at a loss to account for." She is the "image of the uncastrated self capable of unfettered and unlimited self-expression" (42). And, in that freedom, she wields power. She expresses the rebellion that the young, demure Tony cannot—something Tony consciously acknowledges when she agrees to write Zenia's term paper for her. She resembles Tony's "invisible twin," the Russian or Martian sounding Tnomerf Ynot: "Taller, stronger, and more daring" than Tony (153). After the uncomfortable dinner where Tony's father grills her mother on the bridge club meeting she did not attend, Tony goes up to her room and "murmurs to herself in the darkness" the words "*bulc egdirb*," and immediately a full-fledged scene emerges: "The barbarians gallop across the plains. At their head rides Tnomerf Ynot, her long ragged hair flying in the wind, a sword in each of her hands. *Bulc egdirb!* she calls, urging them forward. It's a battle cry and they are on the rampage" (163). It is the language Tony uses to camouflage her increasing distance from her mother and to empower herself. It is nearly the same image that Tony has of Zenia after Zenia relays the story of her sex-commodifying White Russian mother: Zenia has been through horrors and has emerged victorious. "Tony pictures her on a horse, cloak flying, sword arm raised" (184). For Tony, Zenia,

initially, is a means to fighting back her feelings of abandonment and powerlessness.

When the three encounter the resurrected Zenia at the Toxique, Tony reports, “Zenia is as beautiful as ever.” Her hair is “blown around her head by the imperceptible wind that accompanies her everywhere, moulding her clothes against her body, fitfully moving the dark tendrils around her forehead, filling the air with a sound of rustling” (36). For Charis, she “strides right past them in her richly textured dress, with her long legs, her startling new breasts, her glossy hair nebulous around her shoulders” (73). Associated with the “imagery of the moon, of light and dark,” she is, as Stein notes, “like a goddess”: her hair is “black and alive like Medusa’s” (99). She enthralls and casts spells. And usually she is quite good at winning whatever she desires. She is *raw* power, what Cynthia Kuhn identifies as a “Toxic Chic” (49). When Tony, Charis, and Roz first meet her as younger women, Zenia is a seeming conduit who can heal the wounds of abandonment, abuse, and infidelity.

For all three women, Zenia also represents a freedom to break the rules, a freedom from the injunction to forever please. Impassive to the judgments of others, weaver of enthrallments, she is Cixous’s “Laugh of Medusa,” who offers an alternative to a confining, goody-two-shoes conventionality. Who hasn’t at least once had a flickering desire to throw a “revenge party” (141)?¹⁶ Who hasn’t had the desire to scrap the law of the Father, particularly since to live under its reign is to acquiesce to its containing labels of femininity: as lack, as nothingness, as mirror to masculinity? Who hasn’t had a fleeting impulse to throw guilt overboard—to say to hell with all those save-the-whales, save-the-feminine-victims, save-the-raped-moms, save-the-battered-grannies, save-everybody campaigns. “Poky, boring charities,” Roz notes. How “daring” and “liberating” to say “to hell with guilt!” (107). “It was like speeding in a convertible, tailgating, weaving in and out without signaling, stereo on full blast and screw the neighbors, throwing your leftovers out the window, the ribbons, the wrapping paper, the half-eaten filo pastries and the champagne truffles” (107). As Jean Wyatt notes, “Good girls all, the protagonists envy Zenia’s untrammelled inhibition, her ineffable evasion of the ‘ineluctable law’ of the father, and her heedless jouissance” (52). Zenia plays unbridled double to Tony, Charis, and Roz. And she is us. Well, maybe *not exactly us*—us minus the excessive beauty, the exotic *tour de force*, the seemingly unassailable power. Tony, Charis, and Roz do learn from Zenia, and they do

envy her. However, the doubleness Zenia proffers and the insights the protagonists gain are more complicated than simply a recognition and acknowledgment of the Other.¹⁷ In spite of surface similarities, something sets Zenia apart from her fictional predecessors whose rebellion against conventionality, social repression, and theocratic tyranny wields an appeal, even if that appeal comes with a price. It is that difference that articulates the spiritual crisis that confronts Tony, Charis, Roz, and ultimately the reader.

Granted, what we see of Zenia is filtered through Tony, Roz, and Charis,¹⁸ but with that caveat aside, what we see once we get beyond the razzle-dazzle is, in Tony's words, "pure freewheeling malevolence" (458). As Roz suggests, she "kicks low and dirty," figures out "where the jugular is," and then goes for it (113–14). In the abandoned Tony, Zenia discerns the need for a never-experienced human connection, and thus she emerges "like a long-lost friend, like a sister, like a wind," whom Tony welcomes (127). Thus, for Tony, she is an orphan whose White Russian mother rented her out for sex when she was just five or six. In Charis, Zenia discerns a battered psyche that needs to reunite body and spirit, one who, subjected to physical abuse as a child, cannot bear to picture another's pain. She thus appears in Charis's yoga class, bruised and helpless, seeking alternative strategies for healing. In her life story designed for Charis, she is the daughter of a clairvoyant, Romanian gypsy who was murdered by the Germans and left to die in the snow. In successful magazine editor Roz, plagued by her Catholic-Jewish background, Zenia senses Roz's insecurities surrounding her father and her husband. Thus, for Roz, Zenia surfaces as a journalist/consummate storyteller who offers Roz a story she cannot refuse. She is, for Roz, the displaced child whose partial Jewish heritage forces her parents to spirit her out of Nazi Germany, a feat made possible by Roz's father as heroic liaison. When the trio, as young women, first meets Zenia, the lure she exudes initially seems to answer the lack in each of their lives. For each of them, Zenia finds a tale that provides an empathetic link, one that says, "I, the Other, am like you."¹⁹

The trio's later confrontation with Zenia, however, yields something different. Although each of the three women is drawn to Zenia's magnetism and would like to become her at some point, ultimately they recognize that she is not someone they wish to become; all three, in the end, refuse to kill her and, in doing so, reject becoming her. Thus, although Zenia is the catalyst for envy in the young women's lives, it is Zenia herself as a force of envy and pure lust for power that each of the

three women characters must recognize and ultimately refuse. In her “staking out territory” (111), Zenia displaces one by one Tony, Charis, and Roz when she steals their men. She occupies their space and substitutes her own presence for their own. In this it is Zenia who dramatizes envy.²⁰ Zenia gains little from her exploits. Aside from the money, she does not really want the booty she acquires: West, Mitch, and Billy are merely trifles to be tossed away. Like the weasel of “Weasel Nights,” Zenia’s pleasure is in the taking, in the depletion of others. Commenting on the “primitive origins of envy,” Jean Wyatt notes that envy often attributes a kind of omnipotence to the other: “in the moment of envy one perceives only the other’s power, only the subject mastery of a particular field, only the state of being one desires to possess. The facet of the other’s life that one envies fills out the other’s whole figure, eclipsing the parts of his or her existence that might be unsatisfactory. (Indeed, even if one knows that the other is unhappy in some aspect of her life, that knowledge is blocked by envy.) Envy is in the first instance a desire to *be* the other, to possess his or her power” (54–55). As Wyatt further notes, “the sentiment, ‘I want to be you,’” nevertheless, “does not fully account for the malevolence, the nastiness” frequently attributed to envy: the “desire to enjoy the other woman’s success includes a desire to replace her.” The “underlying calculus works like this: ‘there is only one position, and there are two of us; therefore you must go so I can be in your place and be filled with all that you now possess,’ or, phrased more directly, ‘Get out of my way, I want to be you’” (Wyatt 55, 59).²¹ Such a supplanting is, however, an impossible fantasy. The “venom of envy” emerges in the thwarted drive: “the bitter desire to denigrate the other is the secondary effect of the subject’s frustration that s/he cannot *be* the other” (ibid. 55). Driven not by a longing for a desired object but by an inner vacuum or an absence of subjectivity, Tony, Charis, and Roz do not really embody envy; envy does not *fully* reflect Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s response to Zenia; it does, however, reflect Zenia’s response to them.²² And there is no question that the three at some point want to become Zenia. In this they do envy her. However, it is Zenia, in usurping others’ space, who dramatizes it. Although Wyatt’s analysis focuses on the envy generated in Tony, Charis, and Roz, she does acknowledge that Zenia herself enacts envy (58).

What Tony and the others eventually learn in their confrontations with Zenia is the ability to set boundaries. As Tony intuits early in the novel, “People like Zenia can never entangle themselves in your lives unless you invite them” (127). It is not until the end, however, that

Tony and the others are finally able to set those boundaries, each of them recognizing the ploys in Zenia's final tales and then refusing to succumb to their enticements or to Zenia's machinations.

This recognition for Tony, Charis, and Roz emerges late in the diegetic narrative. The tactics of power and victimization that Zenia wields, however, confront the reader throughout the text. In this Zenia functions as a warning to the reader, a means for identifying power tactics and avoiding their implicit victimization. Zenia is a superb strategist who incisively schemes her way into Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's lives. As a military historian, Tony plots intricate military maneuvers, replaying "decisive battles" in order to see whether "they could conceivably have been won by the losing side." She "studied the maps, the accounts, the disposition of the troops, the technologies." The battles were not personal; they were simply "problems that might have been solved in another way" (130). Likewise, Tony, Charis, and Roz were nothing personal for Zenia; they were challenges, battles strategically planned. The only emotion was the thrill of winning: Zenia, in effect, uses Tony's own strengths against her. In appealing to what Tony initially sees as a mutually shared intellect, Zenia befriends her and strikes up an intellectual connection embellished with an isolated, haughty air: the mind and towers—elements with which Tony is very much at home.

Gradually, she uses these comfort zones to detect cracks in Tony's armor. She interrogates in an inquisition-like fashion with questions that catch Tony off guard: "What would cause you to kill yourself?"; "What if you had cancer?"; "Well, then what would cause you to kill someone else?" (145). She draws her out, gets her to talk about what she never talks about—her mother, the most vulnerable part of her life—and then she uses that exposed vulnerability to belittle Tony and steal her strength. Of Tony's mother, Zenia remarks, "She sounds fun-loving" and "full of life." Then she goes on "cheerfully" to say, "I bet she tried to have an abortion, and it didn't work out" (180). This strategy wields a quadruple blow. In valorizing Tony's mother as "fun-loving" and "full of life," it dismisses Tony's most vulnerable feelings, trusted to this point to no one, as frivolous. In suggesting a possible abortion, it intensifies Tony's sense of abandonment. In encouraging Tony to contemplate that "it could be true," it causes her to have an even darker view of her mother than before. Finally, it erases the insidious cruelty through a cavalier cheerfulness that pretends nothing has happened. What Zenia employs are well-known strategies of power:

catch your enemies off guard; use their vulnerability; create distraction through doubt and paranoia; perform outrageous acts and then act as if the damage is nothing, rendering any protest as the fault of the victim.

Zenia also manipulates Tony into feeling guilty for things for which she should feel no guilt, such as making West a cup of tea or admiring Zenia's rebelliousness, an admiration Zenia herself cultivates and then uses to maneuver Tony to write her term paper for her. What Zenia has plotted, however, is more than a free term paper. Attempting to paralyze Tony's actions, she plots Tony's destruction. Claiming a bout of conscience, Zenia tells Tony she thinks that they should confess, which would have ruined Tony's *raison d'être*: "Now Zenia wants to tell, and there goes Tony's life. Many large though shadowy possibilities loom ahead for Zenia—journalism, high finance, even politics have all been mentioned—but university professor has never been among them; whereas for Tony it's the only thing. It's her vocation; without it she'll be useless as an amputated hand" (191). Zenia does extort money from Tony, but again it is more than money that Zenia wants. Zenia wants to usurp that part of Tony that Zenia herself lacks—Tony's intellectual focus. Reflecting on her quandary, Tony muses: "Stripped of her intellectual honesty, her reputation, her integrity, she'll be exiled. And Zenia is in a position to strip her" (191). For Zenia, it is the pure power of winning, of throwing Tony off balance, of extracting from Tony what she can never possess. "If I can't be you, I will destroy you." It is no coincidence that Tony and West watch vampire movies. Vampirelike, Zenia wants to suck the marrow out of Tony's life. What Zenia wants is Tony in ruins.

With Charis, Zenia likewise plays the twin soul. Feigning a shared interest in alternative spiritualities, Zenia manipulates her way into Charis's life. Utilizing Charis's interest in the occult, Zenia claims that her Romanian, gypsy mother was stoned and clubbed by local villagers because they thought she possessed "the evil eye" (301). As she did with Tony, she creates an empathetic link and then exploits a sense of guilt when Charis does not do as she pleases.

Zenia is the weasel of "Weasel Nights" and the weasel who lurks about the farm. "They come at night," Karen's powerful grandmother warms. "They bite the chickens in the neck and suck out their blood." It only takes one weasel in a henhouse, she continues: "They don't kill to eat. . . . They kill for the pleasure of it" (271). When Charis finds Billy and Zenia have gone, she also finds her chickens dead,

their throats slit, and their blood everywhere. She initially concludes: "It must have been a weasel." And Charis is right: it was a weasel of sorts—one with a knife, for it is the "bread knife, with blood on the blade" left in the sink that tells the whole story (309). As dippy as it may be, Charis's chickens "fill her with joy" (227), and it is that joy, which Zenia lacks, that she attempts to kill—not because she can attain it, but because the pleasure for Zenia is in the killing. As she did with Tony, she discerns the weakness and goes for the jugular. Playing on Charis's need to nurture and heal others (a vestige of Charis's own need for healing), Zenia claims she has cancer, and using Charis's sexual insecurities against her, she drives a wedge between Charis and Billy. By "speaking of him in third person even when he's standing right there," Zenia erases his presence: "It creates a circle, a circle of language, with Zenia and Charis on the inside and Billy on the outside" (253). And as she did with Tony, Zenia promotes doubt. "He goes to a lot of meetings," she tells Charis. She uses Charis's intuitive knowledge systems against her, and she insists on calling Charis "Karen," the victim of sexual abuse rendered powerless during her uncle's assaults. By insisting on the victimized Karen, Zenia attempts not only to imprison Charis in her previous powerless incarnation but also to alienate her from herself, from the partial transformation that she has acquired through a different name.

Roz experiences a similar seduction. When Roz encounters Zenia as a journalist posing as a waitress at Nereids, Zenia presents herself as the successful woman with whom Roz identifies, and she offers the story that Roz needs—a tale of her father's heroism. When she maneuvers her way onto the editorial board of Roz's magazine, she convinces Roz to drop the word *Wisdom* from the magazine title and thus changes its fundamental identity. Zenia thus seduces Roz into transforming the magazine into a statement that drains Roz of her identity: the magazine's essence shifts from a feminist statement to one that privileges the glitzy body, an imprisoning image that has plagued Roz all her life.²³ Hinting at the palimpsest that she bears, Zenia comments: "Most women don't want to read about other women who achieve. . . . It makes them feel unsuccessful" (409). After discovering that Zenia has run off with Mitch, Roz sees that she has been "stale-mated." Zenia is a beautiful strategist. Any countermove would be her fault (the fault of the victimized): Her going to Mitch would "come across as jealousy" (413).

Zenia, like the weasel in "Weasel Nights," gets pleasure in the tak-

ing, in the depletion of others. Since such supplanting is an impossible fantasy, the “venom of envy” emerges in the thwarted drive: “The bitter desire to denigrate the other, is the secondary effect of the subject’s frustration that she cannot *be* the other” (Wyatt 55). Lacking Tony’s integrity, Charis’s joy in simple things, and Roz’s compassion, Zenia denigrates each of these three women in turn. And then she disguises the damage she wreaks. Like Charis’s mother, who uses her sweet voice, “the too-sweet voice she used on the Grade Twos” (280), to mask the abuse she wields (both of Charis and of one of the second-grade pupils she teaches), Zenia works by camouflage. She is indeed a beautiful strategist.

The ultimate task is to recognize Zenia’s power, to discern how she wields it, and then to expose and refuse it. In the end, when Zenia lands in the hotel room that she arranges to appeal to each visitor, all three, after nearly being taken in by her latest story, refuse her requests. None of them succumbed, and none of them believed her, which would have been “another way of succumbing” (489).²⁴ What they recognize in the present moment is the entrapping scenario that caught them off guard before. The reader’s recognition, however, is doubled—ascertaining the entrapment of the present moment and the weakening of each of the character’s armor that enables the entrapment to take place at all. And it is at this point that Zenia’s tactics are laid bare. With her saccharine stories no longer working their seductive magic, Zenia simply unleashes brute and cruel verbal force. This is what she says to Tony: “You don’t believe me, do you. . . . Well, help yourself to some righteous indignation, you little snout. You always were the most awful two-faced hypocrite, Tony. A smug dog-in-the-manger prune-faced little shit with megalomaniac pretensions. You think you have some kind of adventurous mind, but spare me!” She goes on to reduce her work to a “warped little battle-scar collection” and strikes at her sexuality by claiming that she sits on West as if he were her “own fresh-laid . . . egg” and by announcing how sleeping with her must be like sleeping with a “gerbil” (457).

Just as Zenia’s tactics are laid bare in the text, so are the characters’ various missteps. At the novel’s outset, Zenia plays “aphid” to Tony’s soul long before Tony knows what is happening. It begins when Tony joins in Zenia’s judgmental comments on others. In finding herself excluded from Zenia’s judgments, Tony reflects how Zenia’s “contempt [is] a ‘work of art,’” how it is a “great privilege to find yourself excluded from it.” She feels “retrieved,” “vindicated,” “grateful”—as

she pads upstairs to her room to write Zenia a check (133). This slight weakening of her armor, this brief merging with Zenia, contributes to her doing what she most likely would never have done under other circumstances—write Zenia's term paper for her, a clear violation of the academic honesty that Tony so values. It is not until the end, when Tony refuses to let Zenia move into her apartment, that she learns to maintain a boundary that more than likely keeps Zenia from wreaking havoc in Tony's life yet again. When Zenia refers to the present Billy in third person, Charis sees what she is doing but ignores it and shifts the blame to Billy (253). Roz can hear Tony's voice, "*Zenia lies*" (401), but she believes her anyway.²⁵

Power wields its own appeal. Zenia herself hints at this process, when she says of her mother who sold her into prostitution at age five, "I adored her" and then adds, "That is how she was able to get away with it" (183). Tnomerf Ynot, Tony's alter ego, although destructive, is also freewheeling and alluring. In her imagined barbarian charge, Tnomerf Ynot's "ragged hair" is "flying in the wind." With Tnomerf Ynot in the lead, they are "sweeping all before them, trampling down crops and burning villages." They "loot and plunder and smash pianos, and kill children." They relish in the damage. "Tnomerf Ynot herself drinks from a skull, with silver handles attached where the ears used to be. She raises the skull high in a toast to victory, and to the war god of the barbarians: *Ettovag!* she yells, and the hordes answer, cheering: *Ettovag! Ettovag!*" (163–64). It is that lure of power that each of the trio resists in the end when they choose not to kill Zenia—not to become her.²⁶

And that power is not just located in the personal; it extends into the global.²⁷ Note this description of Zenia: "Tony pictures her on a horse, cloak flying, a sword-arm raised; or as a bird, a silver and miraculous bird, rising triumphant and unscathed from the cinders of burning and plundered Europe" (184). Zenia here metamorphoses into a plane, most specifically into a bomber. Moreover, Zenia's entrances are interspersed with global events. When Zenia strides past them as if they are invisible, she projects "the smell of scorched earth" (35): obliteration. Just before Tony recognizes Zenia at the Toxique, the discussion is focused on war and on imperial power—on how the United States welcomes Saddam Hussein's crossing the border into Kuwait as an opportunity to try out their "new toys" (32). Tony comments: "The lust for power will prevail. Thousands will die needlessly. Corpses will rot. Women and children will perish. Plagues will rage. Famine will

sweep the land. Relief funds will be set up. Officials will siphon off the cash from them" (33).

This war, as it is seen through U.S. policy, however, is not war—just as Zenia is not seen for the havoc that she wreaks. These allusions to U.S. power and the first Gulf War, which are coterminous with the setting of the novel, become more explicit in the remaining incremental narratives of the *Toxique*. In pondering Tony's reference to the Rubicon, Charis extends Tony's reference to the violation of boundaries; the next moment, Zenia appears. Roz, in pondering the Rubicon, extends its meaning (when she is not thinking about lipstick) to overexpansion, the decline of empires; the next moment Zenia appears, "staking out territory" (111). It is a logical extension. Atwood, in her discussion of victim positions, notes: "The positions are the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group, or a victimized individual" (*Survival* 46). The first step in overcoming victimization (someone else's abuse of power) is naming that condition; whether in the personal or political realm, the same processes apply.

When Zenia first resurrects herself in the *Toxique*, Tony, Roz, and Charis are discussing Gerald Bull, whose "life-time obsession was the construction of a 'Supergun,' a huge howitzer able to fire satellites into space or launch artillery shells thousands of miles into enemy territory" (*FAS* 1). The potential for destruction is clear: "Bull specialized in increasing the range of shells. He would improve their aerodynamics and would add bleeder charges to the bottom of the shells that would emit gas to fill the vacuum left behind a shell in flight" (Redford 2). Exploiting the concept of artillery range, Bull wanted a gun that exceeded the distance fired by the enemy, which means one could blow one's enemy "to bits without risk to yourself" (*ibid.*)—a bit like Zenia.²⁸ Bull's life story itself is unusual and bears some uncanny resemblance to the stories surrounding Zenia: his childhood was considered "loveless"; his mother died when he was young; his father abandoned him; he was reared by an aunt; he was known for his exaggerated claims; and his obsession with the supergun did not spring from a "militarist" perspective—he "just found something he really loved doing," the creation of power for power's sake (Redford 1–2). It is this same Gerald Bull to whom Zenia claims to have had assassination ties at the end of the novel.

In the opening scenes at the *Toxique* where the women are discussing the first Gulf War, Roz asks, "Who's going to win?" Tony responds, "The battle or the war?" And then continues: "For the battle, it'll

definitely be technology. Whoever's got air superiority. Now who could that be?" (33). Although the United States clearly is deemed "winner of the battle," the outcome of the war remains unknown—apocalyptic. Whatever power tactics can be discerned in Zenia's maneuvers at the individual level can also be discerned at the national and global levels. And likewise, they serve as warnings. "The personal is not political, thinks Tony: the personal is military. War is what happens when language fails" (43). Zenia is the only one who does not tell her own story. She is, in effect, the failure of language and its result—war. The first Gulf War is "not a war" but "market expansion" (32). Zenia asks Tony what she would rather have from other people, "Love, respect or fear?" Tony at first replies "respect" and then changes her answer to "love." Zenia retorts: "Not me. . . . I'd choose fear." It is, Zenia maintains, "the only thing that works" (209). Zenia uses this strategy throughout the novel, which the reader should see long before Tony, Charis, and Roz do. Zenia does serve as warning in the personal realm, but she serves equally as warning in the political one. "The personal is military" (43). In other words, the power tactics wielded at the individual level function as a microcosm for global politics.

Ironically, now a second Gulf War wages. It, too, is "not a war" but a "liberation." (It is also "market expansion"—Halliburton's extending control over Iraqi oil fields—but the American press rarely talks about that.) "War is what happens when language fails." Zenia's response privileging fear is purely Machiavellian—"shock and awe." However Zenia is configured, her boundaries reach far beyond her body and her narrative—to a global narrative that is once again in full force. If Zenia's enticement is, in part, an untrammelled jouissance that has eluded the fetters of the symbolic order (most specifically language), her roots, in Lacanian terms, remain in the imaginary, in the prelanguage state of unarticulated desire. She represents an imaginary unity gone twisted into a desire for control and power.²⁹ What others see in Zenia, at least initially, is not her vacuity but the lure of power, however illusory. As a product of the individual and cultural imaginary, what and who she is becomes difficult to ascertain—what she represents in many ways is beyond words, beyond language. Any rational critique (for example, that there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and never were) seems to pale. However, identifying with an untrammelled power/jouissance yields an imaginary acquisition of power, when, in reality, individual power is being siphoned away—which explains a lot about the 2004 U.S. elections. Recognize

the power tactics, the text urges, or as Atwood suggests in *Survival*, “Naming your own condition, your own disease, is not necessarily the same as acquiescing in it. Diagnosing it is the first step” (54). And that is all we have. Set boundaries on the exploitation of “raw” power. The injunction seems imperative—apocalyptic. “Who’s going to win?” Only the answer to the “battle” was given. Who is it that is poised to fall from that tower?³⁰

Notes

1. See also Howells’s further commentary on *The Robber Bride*, in which she notes the significance of Zenia’s postcoloniality, her role as “nomadic subject” who causes Tony, Charis, and Roz to confront issues of ethnicity and an illusory nationality. See also Stein (99).

2. Zenia also shares with Moira the epitaph “the whore of Babylon.”

3. After Lucy disappears one day with no explanation, Lois, in a later reflection that tries to come to terms with Lucy’s disappearance, remarks: “But a dead person is a body; a body occupies space; it exists somewhere. You can see it, put it in a box, and bury it in the ground. But Lucy is not in a box, or in the ground. Because she is nowhere definite, she could be anywhere” (117). Similarly, when Zenia returns from the dead, Roz considers that “she might be anywhere” (116), and Tony likewise reflects that she is both everywhere and nowhere.

4. My thanks go to Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis for the suggestions included in this paragraph.

5. In contrast, Iris complains, “This, then, was where I was to grin and bear it—the bed I hadn’t quite made” (307).

6. Iris’s disagreeable treatment of Myra—made visible by her comments in the text as she accuses Myra of snooping after she’s dead—becomes even more disturbing upon Iris’s revelation that Myra could be her own half-sister.

7. Iris admits, “The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it. Impossible, of course” (95).

8. When Reenie meets Richard Griffen, she sneers, “He’s new money, anyhow.” She insists, “it was a well-known fact that the Griffens were common as dirt” (175).

9. Iris’s father, shortly after her mother’s death, also asks Iris to “promise to look after Laura” (101). The two requests may have increased Iris’s jealousy of her sister.

10. Of course, it is possible that Laura kills herself because Iris has told her that Alex is dead.

11. Iris also sees a halo-light surrounding her sister the day of Laura’s suicide.

12. For example, Iris’s memoir is composed of language while Laura’s comprises primarily symbols: “Avilion, no, No, No. Sunnyside, No. Xanadu, no, No.

Queen Mary, no no. New York, no. Avilion, No at first. Water Nixie, X. 'Besotted.' Toronto again. X. X. X. X. X. O." (500)

13. "The Z comes from the last part of Roz's name, the en from the last part of Charis's original name Karen and the ia from the last part of Tony's real name Antonia" (Enos 14).

14. Bouson notes: "And thus Tony views Zenia as her own lawless, angry twin identity; Charis sees Zenia as her split-off vulnerable and enraged child-self, Karen; and Roz finds lodged in Zenia the envious and greedy aspects of her self she wants to deny" (151). Aguiar observes that each of the protagonists has a dream of fusion in which each merges with Zenia: "Tony sees West leaving with Zenia, but this Zenia has 'gills,' a reference to Tony's nickname of 'Guppy.' Charis dreams that she merges with Zenia, representing her own fear of re-emerging with Karen. And Roz dreams that Roz is not only like her father, but that he/she makes reference to her Catholic upbringing. These dreams reunite the fragments of each protagonist's separated past, joining split sides of each past. This integration is what ultimately enables each to confront Zenia and reclaim from Zenia that which belongs to her" (133).

15. Wilson is quoting Marie-Louise Von Franz's *Shadow of Evil in Fairy Tales* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1987), 105.

16. After the landlord evicts Tony and West, they paint the entire apartment with the required "proper paint" but in black. Zenia notes, "It will take him more than two coats to cover *this*."

17. Call this a dialogue, if you will: Aguiar focuses on Zenia's redemptive function; Raschke, although acknowledging that all three characters emerge as stronger, more complete individuals in the end, focuses on Zenia's destructive influence—on recognizing it and naming it.

18. As many critics have noted, Zenia, although a storyteller, does not tell her own story. And that difference is indeed part of what sets Zenia apart, but not entirely. Lucy in "Death by Landscape" does not tell her own story, and she evokes a positive energy in the end—"currents of energy, charged with violent color" (118).

19. Zenia also tells West a different version of her heritage that mirrors his need to be a white knight in shining armor. For West, she is the sexually abused victim of a Greek Orthodox priest.

20. Jean Wyatt in her reading of *The Robber Bride* makes a useful distinction between jealousy and envy: "As Melanie Klein established, envy rests on a two-person rather than a three-person dynamic. While jealousy pivots on the rivalry for a third person, the object of desire, envy is the wish to be in the other's place. 'Envy is about being, not having,' as Jessica Benjamin succinctly puts it. In *The Robber Bride* each of the characters wants to be Zenia" (37). Although I agree with both Wyatt's definition and interpretation, I contend that Zenia is the figure who most dramatizes the dynamics of envy.

21. Wyatt contends that under "the old rules," women battled for a man and in this competition viewed other women as "potential enemies," as "threat[s]" to their "well-being." The battleground, however, is now shifting. Referring to a previous dynamic in her article, Wyatt notes, "the female academics quoted above are not competing with women in the old way for a man; rather they envy other women for what they are, for their accomplishments or their positions of power" (54).

22. For all three women, Zenia does promise, as Wyatt suggests, the opportunity of wholeness, and she does serve, as Aguiar suggests, as a means of recovering the repressed aspects of the self.

23. See also Cynthia Kuhn, who notes the impact of this change as well: from one that emphasized intellectual content to one that embraces a “*Glamour- or Cosmopolitan-like format*” (70).

24. Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis notes that Roz’s refusal of Zenia is more tenuous than others’ in that she “buys time” (165–66).

25. This denial, which is enacted by all three characters, is what Atwood describes as Position One in the Basic Victim Positions in *Survival*. The driving force behind Position One is denial (46).

26. Some argue that Zenia’s triple death (her falling from the tower, her ovarian cancer, and her heroin overdose) corresponds with each of the three women having a part in Zenia’s death. Such a literal reading does not play out. The three’s foiled murders, which emerge as more comical than anything (e.g., Tony with a gun and a cordless grill), do not display the malice or the nastiness that usually is associated with envy. Moreover, the determined cause of death was the heroine overdose, not the fall from the tower, which was the only possible link to causality: producing a heroin overdose and ovarian cancer are not within the trio’s scope. What they do kill is Zenia’s power over them.

27. With the exception of Cora Ann Howells’s discussion of Zenia as a Western blight and Karen Stein’s noting her associations with war, most interpretations of Zenia locate her effects in the personal. Although Stein notes Zenia’s connections with war (“She reappears on the eve of the Gulf War, her childhood stories are associated with war, and her connections with the three friends grow from war stories”), she sees Zenia’s function quite differently: “Thus Zenia offers each a new story, a new interpretation of the past that may release them from the old stories that keep them in victim positions” (102).

28. These superguns, moreover, were designed to have the potential of “firing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons to the range of up to 1,000 kilometers.” Although this dream weapon was not manufactured, smaller versions were (GH-N-45 and G-5), the latter having the capacity to deliver both a tactical nuclear warhead and chemical shells (*FAS 1*). Bull sold this technology to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war to further Iraq’s ability to thwart Israel and to enable Iraq to “join the club of major nuclear powers.” This particular use of the supergun became known specifically as Project Babylon (Redford 3).

29. Lacan theorizes that the prelanguage state, what he calls the imaginary, is marked by an imagined unity with the world. Thus, the child imagines itself as part of everything in its world. The shift from the imaginary order to the symbolic order is marked by an entry into language. It is coterminous with the mirror stage in which the child also imagines a projected future-perfect “I,” or a unified and mastered self., which is also illusory—what Lacan calls *méconnaissance*. I theorize that the future-perfect “I” is also beyond language, that the imaginary fusion the child experiences in the imaginary stage is transposed onto an imagined all-powerful sense of the self.

30. “A rejection of war games” is the essence of Position Four in Atwood’s victim positions (*Survival* 76).

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CHAPTER 6



Atwood's Space Crone

*Alchemical Vision and Revision in Morning in the Burned House**

KATHRYN VANSPANCKEREN

What kind of person would best represent the human race to beings from another galaxy? Ursula Le Guin has imagined not a captain of industry but instead a "Space Crone," a poor old woman found selling small items in a market—smart but lacking formal education, a wife and mother, and now a grandmother. Le Guin argues that her hard-earned wisdom and lifelong habit of observation would make her the best representative of the human race. Such a woman might not care much what others think. Social models for postmenopausal women lacking, she has had to "give birth to herself." Her fund of stories would best instruct space beings about humanity.

Atwood has given us a galaxy of remarkable older women. In her fiction, mature women whose impassive surface hides a wealth of awareness appear in *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, and, one might argue, *Oryx and Crake* (Oryx's appearance belying her harsh experiences). She appears in *Cat's Eye* in the guise of an artist who can represent experiences (such as being a repressed suburban wife of the 1950s) that she never had. Ancient Iris Chase Griffen, a master storyteller, completes her family's story of betrayal and victimization before

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her own death by interweaving three narratives—as if she herself were a triple goddess or the three weaving fates—in *The Blind Assassin*.

There is something especially uncanny about the old women in Atwood's poetry—one has only to think of Moodie and Circe in the earlier volumes. Strange crones also thrive in the cracks of the hybrid forms that Atwood has played with since *Murder in the Dark* was published in 1983. *Interlunar* (1984) features a spiraling sequence of snake poems and weird outer-space pieces such as "Valediction: Intergalactic." *Good Bones* offers a female shape-shifter ("My Life as a Bat"); a representative from a female-only planet who foresees the extinction of humans ("Cold-Blooded"); and another female from outer space who tells of her people ("Homecoming"). In that book a witch warns: "I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it" (29–30). The voices of uncanny women carry over into her 1995 collection *Morning in the Burned House*, her first volume of traditional-looking poems since *Selected Poems II* came out in 1987.

Atwood's poetry reveals recurring patterns in her artistry. Where novels are compounds, as it were, poems are elements in a periodic table. To adapt Baudrillard's terms (though he is discussing modern versus postmodern stances), the novel suggests a map while the poem is a simulation, "nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive." Denizens of the "dimension of simulation," poems embody "genetic miniaturization" that allows them to combine and recombine. Poems are the smaller units that may be found in "matrices, memory banks and command models." The poem space forms "a hyperreal" that informs the novels (Baudrillard 2–3). The notion of the hyperreal is analogous to the process through which variable, interchangeable motifs build up recognizable structures in folktales and myths from oral tradition. The complex, shifting, ambiguous hyperreal that poems inhabit, like a virtual reality, includes gaps, reversals, and paradoxes, yet remains identifiable. No single poem can completely articulate the whole of the shifting vision or any one of its stages; rather, the poems participate in a larger pattern beyond them. Insofar as the poems are artistically realized, they exist in and for themselves, but they also gesture to an imaginative space imbued with transformation.

In this essay the archetype of the female descent is treated as such a "hyperreal"—a temporary and unstable yet recurring combination of elements subject to inversion and reversal. To understand this hyperreal archetypal structure in the poems in Atwood's most recent volume, it is helpful to explore their organization, combinations, and inter-

relationships. Atwood expended much energy on selecting, ordering, and reordering them.¹ For example, the most accessible poems appear in its second part, a gallery of aging women of myth and popular culture who take their turns on stage. From the sphinxlike Sekhmet to movie stars such as Ava Gardner, Atwood's personae speak in dramatic monologues—sardonic, witty, and sometimes rueful—that seem to explode patriarchal beliefs. It would be easy to feel that these poems represent mostly strong feminist voices. Nevertheless, none of these voices is truly free; all are casualties in the gender wars, victims and/or victimizers. They do not provide models for the aging, disillusioned speaker of the first part, nor do they help her work through the death of her father in the fourth part or go on without him in the fifth part. No individual poem offers an overarching narrative or easy solution. Rather, the book is indeterminate and open-ended. Taken together, however, one can make out an intertextual pattern like an electronic imprint. Attention to her revisions reveals her patterning vision at work. Her changes are too many and complex to do justice to in this article; I have confined myself to mentioning a few significant revisions.

From the beginning, Atwood's works have issued from a profound engagement with mythology; for example, the last chapter of her book *Negotiating with the Dead* takes the descent myth as a master trope. The novel that first brought her a wide readership—*Surfacing*—traces a female descent, as well; although critics still debate whether the descent is ironic or not, the structure is explicit and recognizable, drawing as it does on Jungian images popularized by Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and others. It is not inappropriate to turn to popularizations in dealing with Atwood's use of mythology, since she employs them, as Beran has noted (86n1). In fact, she has perpetrated several herself (notably, *Survival*). Atwood's recent poems develop what Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen, who has developed a psychology of women drawing on Greek mythology, has termed an "alchemical" vision of female creative potential. Associated with the powerful magnetism of Aphrodite, a goddess who was never victimized and who enjoys sensuality, alchemical vision allows women to enter freely into new relationships—with their raw materials, if they are artists—thereby "giving birth to" or reinventing themselves (Bolen 224, 241). Bolen, following Paul Friedrich, notes that the words traditionally used to describe Aphrodite—gold, honey, speech, semen—link fertility and verbal creation.² For Bolen, alchemical vision allows a woman to

emerge from encounters intact yet imaginatively fertilized (not necessarily physically), like Aphrodite (224–27).

This freedom, which a virgin or mother may not be able to risk, is the crone's for the taking. Alchemical purification from dross is a provocative metaphor for menopause in the case of older women, who need no longer feel defined by their bodies and roles involving fertility and childbearing. Earlier images of self as potential mate, wife, mother, and nurturer no longer fully describe a woman who has moved beyond menopause. She is freed to pursue new goals and embark on physical or spiritual adventures. She may start a business or school or foundation, pursue a new activity or sport or art, or enter onto a spiritual path. Whatever her pursuit, the older woman possesses a new source of strength from within and must learn to access and assert it skillfully. While estrogen and oxytocin induce women of childbearing age to nurture, form associations with others, and cling to relationships, after menopause women become more assertive, independent, and vocal (Fisher 41, 124). Indeed, unlike men, older women do not lose their libido; after menopause estrogen no longer masks the woman's testosterone, the main cause of desire (*ibid.* 204). Especially if her children are gone and she has achieved economic security, the older woman is a latent powerhouse whose wisdom and energy are sorely needed on many fronts. Atwood's continuing activism in the public sphere makes her a model for older women in this regard. This essay investigates how the older woman sheds previous more or less externally imposed identities and actively rediscovers her own identity, which often appears in dream and artwork as the image of a child, usually a girl, alongside alchemical images such as burning, suggesting purification of flesh and earthly substance.

Wisdom is primarily associated with female goddesses in world mythology (Young xxi–xxii). Classical myths of the female descent of figures such as Persephone and Psyche, like the earlier Sumerian and Babylonian mythology surrounding the descent of Inanna, suggest that the price of wisdom, especially for women, is a descent to the underworld. Medical science indicates that the female sustains special risks of staying in a figurative underworld: madness, depression, or obsession. Numerous studies indicate that depression afflicts almost twice as many women as men (see Weissman and Olfson), and the madwoman in the attic has become a cliché. A descent may be particularly hard for the old woman: society does not value the crone, and men fear her. Demeter's depression at the loss of Persephone brings famine.

Sumerian Inanna (Babylonian Ishtar) narrowly escapes being trapped in the underworld; Kore or Persephone endures a portion of each year in hell; Euridice is left behind through Orpheus's error.

This story of a female descent to the underworld was associated with the story of Demeter and Persephone, celebrated for two thousand years until the destruction of the shrine at Eleusis in 395 C.E. The "Hymn to Demeter," the central story of the Eleusinian Mysteries, tells of Hades' rape of Persephone. After Persephone returned from the underworld, Demeter offered the Mysteries to humans. The Mysteries—fruits of the female descent—were secrets known only to initiates of this ancient cult that continued goddess worship into the Christian era. In its later forms, the Mysteries became a celebration of Eros and Psyche, a humanized version of the earlier body of myth.³ Psyche has relevance for many women: she is a lover (like Aphrodite), a wife (like Hera), a pregnant mother (like Demeter), and one who descends and returns from the underworld (like Persephone and Inanna) (Bolen 259). The initiates of the Mysteries were seekers of rebirth from death. Eros was not simply a beloved; rather, Psyche and the initiate sought the generative life force. In the ancient Orphic creation myth, Eros, the son of the goddess Night (a form of the ancient triple goddess) and the Wind, was hatched from a silver egg floating in the womb of Night. This ancient image of the cosmic egg of creation attracted Atwood's attention at the time she composed most of the poems in *Morning in the Burned House*, as her sketches of it at the end of this essay indicate. Eros was the first-born god, and from him sprang all other gods and the universe (Graves 11).⁴ The Eros and Psyche myth was known to Roman writers such as Apuleius, an initiate of the Mystery Cult of Isis, whose version is the most familiar to us. The story has been retold in a number of versions, including *Till We Have Faces* (1956), the novel by C. S. Lewis, which is very close to Apuleius's version.⁵ It has been interpreted for modern times by Jungian scholar Erich Neumann, who stresses the birth of love, incarnate as the female child, from the union of Eros and Psyche (137–42). Apuleius's version of the tale, without its frame story, is translated in Neumann's book *Amor and Psyche*.

The tale tells of Amor ("love" in Latin) and Psyche ("soul" in Greek). Aphrodite, jealous of Psyche's charms, has asked Amor to destroy Psyche with his arrow, but instead, distracted by her beauty, he wounds himself on his own arrow in his attempt. Irresistibly attracted to her, he visits her at night. Psyche remains ignorant of her lover's identity until one night, overcome with curiosity, she holds up a lamp

and sees that her lover is Amor (Eros), the handsome god of love. Some hot wax falling from the lamp wakes Eros, who flees. Psyche is determined to find him and consults his mother, but Aphrodite disapproves of her son's liaison with a mortal and makes Psyche undertake four progressively more dangerous tasks ultimately leading to the underworld. In *Goddesses in Everywoman*, Bolen has provided a map for woman's self-realization based on the four tasks that Aphrodite set for Psyche: the Sorting of Seeds (resistance to despair achieved through receptive intuition); the Gathering of Golden Fleece (wielding of compassionate power); the Filling of the Crystal Flask (emotional distance attained through perspective); and the Descent into the Underworld (learning to say no). At all four stages, an appropriate helper appears to assist Psyche. These helpers suggest instincts or latent strengths of the female psyche that await activation (Bolen 257–62).

Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House*, published when Atwood was nearing sixty, leads deeper and deeper, like a stairway into the underworld. Most of its poems were written while on tour promoting *The Robber Bride*, and Atwood noted that she found hotels particularly conducive to writing poetry, since she did not frequent the hotel bars ("Mellower"). Hotel rooms' eerie interchangeability may have encouraged her to shuffle times and places as intertexts, as she does in "A Pink Hotel in California" from that volume (76–77).⁶ She took special care in organizing the book, partly so that some pieces that had been written before, like "The Loneliness of the Military Historian," published in *Harper's* magazine in December 1990, where it appeared in part as a protest against the first Gulf War, could find appropriate placement.⁷ Age and infirmity were much on her mind; not only had she gone through the death of her father but also Graeme Gibson was recovering from a biopsy and operation in the summer of 1994.⁸ Early on she collected the poems about her father into one section. As the fourth, and penultimate, section the book leads up to it and goes beyond it. The death of the father prompts the poet's descent and depression and catalyzes her ultimate rebirth through love in the final, fifth section of Atwood's book. Note that while the myth describes four phases, Atwood's volume is in five sections, allowing her poem sequence to move beyond known constructs and open out into an open-ended visionary dimension.

In this essay, "phase" refers to the myth, while "section" refers to Atwood's book. The dramatic monologues in section two create an effect of psychodrama that rises, at times, to approximate ritual.

Atwood draws on contemporary performative techniques to enhance this effect. The strong rhetoric of her dramatic monologues is oral, colloquial, and persuasive. She takes liberty with the mythic material. She is irreverent and avoids clichéd versions of classical mythology, depicting the underworld as a realm of creativity as well as danger. Rather than referencing Psyche in reverential tones, Atwood's poems introduce pop culture stars or burlesque artists voicing psychic truths in comic deadpan. There is a ghastly aplomb in these darkly humorous poems. The book is in part an elegy not only for Atwood's father but also for the patriarchy. But it is much more, and that much more is particularly directed to women. The world does not stop when one man, or the power of Man, ceases. At the end of the book, as snow freezes all things, an old woman is still speaking, becoming a part of outer space. The crone voices set cackling in an early part of *Morning* (the anteroom of the book-as-hospital, as it were, where the father lies dying) are funny and bawdy, like feminist satyr plays relieving a Greek tragedy. They are also cautionary tales. They remind us of the dangers of female sympathy for needy men, a trap that a woman often runs willingly into and that lets her avoid the hardest task—to discover what she herself is and wants before she dies. This is a task that, for the old woman, must no longer be deferred.

Phase I: The Sorting of Seeds

For the first task in the myth, Aphrodite leads Psyche into a chamber and commands her to sort a heap of seeds—corn, millet, lentils, and so on—into different piles by nightfall. Even a casual reader would note the connection of seeds and growth. With the assistance of ants, Psyche is able to accomplish this impossible task. According to Bolen, the Sorting of Seeds—the initial stage of the female quest—involves resistance to despair achieved through receptive intuition. In this stage a woman must sort out a “jumble of conflicted feelings and competing loyalties.” This “inward task” involves an honest sifting through of the woman's feelings, values, and motives, separating the dross from the truly significant “seeds” of creative change. This process requires “staying with” confused situations without acting until clarity emerges and a woman trusts “the ants.” Depending on the woman, the ants could be instincts, intuition arising from the unconscious, or logical analysis and prioritization (Bolen 259–60).

The first section of *Morning* takes place in this stage. The poems present a jumble of emotions that have been ignored for decades by the speaker, who wakes up to the fact that old age has crept up on her. "You Come Back" sets the scene, amid dirty tangled sheets (throughout this volume evoking the dreamworld/underworld). The second poem, "A Sad Child," recalls unfinished business, the old hurt of not being the "favorite child." The third poem, "In the Secular Night," shows unfinished business again tugging at the speaker. The draft version in the Atwood Papers reveals her intent to make age a central issue. Atwood added the phrase "thirty years later" to the longhand version to emphasize the passage of time; the book version changes the thirty to forty, making the issue of age even clearer.⁹ The next poem, "Waiting," calls up the dawning consciousness of future loss as Atwood's aging speaker looks back at her childhood self and forward to the last poem in the book, "Morning in the Burned House," another poem-scene of childhood recollected and in this case transfigured. In the fifth poem, "February," addressed to her cat, the speaker is still in bed but knows she must rise up from the frozen torpor of self-pity. In "Asparagus" she sits at an outdoor café in spring, the season of asparagus, with a man torn between love for two women. Feeling old, she humorously wonders if she should look like a crone so her advice will improve, or if she should get a pet lizard. The seventh and last poem in section I, "Red Fox," introduces the trickster with its *modus operandi* of subterfuge and theft; the fox suggests Atwood's persona here and elsewhere (VanSpanckeren, "Humanizing" 103). These poems suggest a sifting through of old memories, ideas, and belongings, much like the sorting of feelings and belongings after a death. The seemingly random process culminates in a recognition of the self as a yet unfulfilled "lean vixen" crossing the ice, filled with "longing / and desperation" and "adept at lies," desperate to "steal something / that doesn't belong to her . . . one more chance / or other life" (16–17).

An absence—a poem left out of *Morning*, "Gathering,"—lies at the heart of this section and indeed of the whole volume. It was the original first poem in early stages of the book manuscript. The following reproduces the longhand manuscript draft; words and letters in parentheses were crossed out, and underlined words were added from the margins or above the lines in the original.¹⁰

the people (I) you know are getting older
A great (thum) unseen thumb (p) is pushing

sundown, time of the moon and darkness, Psyche can pluck strands of their wool off the brambles. In this way power is acquired and destruction averted. According to Bolen, this stage involves the gaining of power (the Golden Fleece) necessary for any woman. If a woman is not used to competing, she may easily become hurt or cynical and retreat into a shell. Having clarified her priorities, the female self in transition needs to use wiles and indirection while her strength and resolution grow (Bolen 260).

The eight dramatic monologues in Atwood's section two exhibit observation and indirection on the battlefield of the gender wars. In "Miss July Grows Older" an aging woman (seemingly a *Playboy* centerfold) is devising crone strategies: "what you get is no longer / what you see" (23). In the second poem, "Manet's Olympia," Olympia thinks, therefore she is: "I, the head, am the only subject / of this picture" (25). As for "Monsieur Voyeur," she addresses him as an object: "You, sir, are furniture. / Get stuffed" (25). In "Daphne and Laura and So Forth" victimized women with "eight fingers / and a shell" (27) are working on tricks for survival: "venom, a web, a hat, / some last resort" (27). In "Cressida to Troilus: A Gift," the gift—the woman's body—is a trick that kills. "Ava Gardner Reincarnated as a Magnolia" is an old hand at wiles and indirection, "a glass / of wine or two on the terrace, / bare leg against white trouser" (32). An example of Bolen's Aphrodite consciousness, as a human Ava was able to move in and out of relationships freely, finding sex to be "the joy," "that ancient ploy / and vital puzzle, water- / of-life cliché that keeps things going" (32). The final poems in the sequence portray increasingly powerful female personages. "Sekhmet, the Lion-Headed Goddess of War, Violent Storms, Pestilence, and Recovery from Illness, Contemplates the Desert in the Metropolitan Museum of Art" recalls the Virgin Mary's transformation into a lion gnawing bones in *Cat's Eye* (68), as well as Yeats's slouching beast in "The Second Coming." Sekhmet embodies power without compassion (40–41) and is imagined as a sardonic ancient statue in the Metropolitan Museum with a crone's sense of humor: "if it's selfless / love you're looking for / you've got the wrong goddess" (40). "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing" is a pivotal poem in this sequence because, like Plath's "Daddy," this curse poem, overflowing with bitter humor, acknowledges female power. Helen's whole female identity is squeezed into a sexual role that she wields like a laser. Like Atwood's much earlier poem "Siren Song," this seductive trickster text draws the reader into a fiery doom

(VanSpanckeren, "Humanizing" 112). Helen's objectification by male voyeurs has dehumanized her and emptied her of all feeling except rage. The cause of the wars in the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, the three great epics of Western literature, Helen—like Pandora and Eve in other foundational myths—is blamed for introducing destruction to the world. The poem recalls Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" that ends "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (Plath 9). Atwood's final version of the poem ends as follows:

Look—my feet don't hit the marble!
 Like breath or a balloon, I'm rising,
 I hover six inches in the air
 in my blazing swan-egg of light.
 You think I'm not a goddess?
 Try me.
 This is a torch song.
 Touch me and you'll burn. (36)

Revisions in "Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing" reveal that the manuscript version originally was entitled simply "Counter Dancing." Here and elsewhere in this volume Atwood revises to find titles that highlight the mythic and archetypal dimensions. For instance, "King Lear in Respite Care" was originally simply "Respite Care." "Cressida to Troilus: A Gift" was originally simply "The Gift." The wonderfully dismissive title "Daphne and Laura and So Forth" originally was "The Origin of Laurel," referencing the tree. Other changes in "Helen of Troy . . ." make it more pertinent to women. The first line originally read, "The world is full of people / who'd tell me I should be ashamed of myself." The book version changes "people" to "women." The first draft lacked sensory detail. These lines—slightly altered in the final printed version—were added to the first draft from the margin:

the music smells like foxes,
 humid as August, languorous as wilting bows
 or crisp as heated metal, searing the nostrils:
 the word sex plastered like
 neon at belly level.

The reference to the fox suggests the trickster's wiles. Perhaps unconsciously aware of Plath's poem, Atwood added "breath or a balloon,

I'm rising" to the ending; the word "rising" recalls Plath's "rise" (Atwood Papers).

Helen's fiery power derives from her ability to manipulate male lust, something that she has learned over millennia of counter dancing. Like the fox in section one, she listens to the instructions of the flexible green reed, as it were, and gathers her shining tufts of Golden Fleece from brambles in the night. Helen, Sekhmet, and the other timeless figures of women of section two who hail from art, myth, and popular culture speak with the humorous, ironic, outraged voices of crones as they display their wounds and weapons.

Phase III: The Filling of the Crystal Flask

In this task, Aphrodite sets a small crystal flask into Psyche's hands and tells her that she must fill it from water flowing from a dangerous river. This river leaps off a precipice at the world's summit and falls to the deepest part of the underworld. The waters have etched deep marks into the cliffs, and dragons guard them. Psyche despairs, but an eagle aids the protagonist; it has long-range sight, or perspective, and it can see overall patterns. Through the eagle's help, transparency and objectivity are gained. Bolen sees these waters as an image of the "circular flow of life." She interprets the eagle's aid as "emotional distance gained through perspective" and speaks of the importance for women to be mindful and gain an awareness of "what is significant" (260–61). It is also possible to see in this story of an individual trying to fill a small flask from overpowering, cascading waters the necessity of understanding one's own personal limits and to take from life's flow exactly that which one needs, no more and no less, so as not to be swept away by the universe's multiplicity and force, imagined as an incessant and powerful cataract.

The nine poems in the third section raise issues of damage. The poems do not suggest solutions but instead point out danger areas, injustice, and dislocation, particularly for women. "Romantic" warns women against self-sacrifice for men. "Cell" envisions cancer cells that, like humans, want more life. "Marsh Languages" explores the ways in which Western dualism and binary opposites (as in computer language and electronics) have eradicated all other, more organic languages. "Frogless" explores pollution and extinction. "Half-hanged Mary" recalls an innocent woman—Atwood's ancestor—who is hanged for witchcraft but survives; her victimization turns her into a witch. In

"Owl Burning" villagers burn another woman for witchcraft. "Down" envisions victims as unsatisfied ghosts. In the last poem, "Pink Hotel in California," the speaker recalls her family cabin in the woods in Canada during World War II, when words like "smoke, gun, boot, oven" tasted "pure" (76–77). From the perspective of age and the deathly hotel room with its dresser showing "antique man-bored wormholes," Atwood recognizes that no one is innocent or spared: "The fire. The scattered ashes. The winter forest" (77).

The crystal flask suggests transparency and objectivity, the essence of the military historian in section three. Changes in "The Loneliness of the Military Historian," originally entitled "The Military Historian Speaks Frankly," reveal some of Atwood's concern with women and power. The poem manuscript—a war protest, as noted before—criticizes women's traditional roles in war, specifically the idea that "women should not contemplate war / should not weigh tactics impartially, view either side and denounce nothing" (Atwood Papers). In the gender wars, men have a vested interest in keeping women emotional and ignorant of tactics. The rough draft puts these issues up front, bringing up the speaker, a female military historian, at the end. The final version begins with her, describes her in more detail, and presents her as an expert on war. The effect is to empower her, and women. The revision also makes the poem more effective as a dramatic monologue (Atwood Papers).

Poems from this section challenge the reader to see with an eagle's eye and address real issues—personal, but also historical and ecological—with clarity, the necessary precondition for the older woman's spiritual adventures. These adventures may take the form of working on unresolved personal trauma (as in "Half-hanged Mary"), or the adventure may be social or political, in which case the older woman may work in the world, pitting her energy against dragons such as cancer ("Cell") and environmental degradation ("Marsh Languages," "Frogless"). In any case the adventure will issue from a space of spiritual clarity that opens up after stages of patiently sifting through old matters and quietly gathering one's nascent powers.

Phase IV: The Descent into the Underworld (Learning to Say No)

For the fourth and last test, Aphrodite commands Psyche to descend to the underworld to fill a small box for Persephone to fill with beauty

it is because it ought to be there.

there is no reason why it shouldn't be there. (Atwood Papers)

The draft associates the father with the moon and its regenerating mystery as well as with a magician's dove (originally an egg, suggesting rebirth and the orphic egg from which Eros, the creator of the universe, emerged). The moon presides over the whole rough draft, including the end. Atwood's final, printed version reverses this optimistic, moon-drenched vision. It leaves us in the dark, with a blank sense of nothingness and disorientation as of waking in a strange place (as Hades would be):

Only a dream, I think, waking

to the sound of nothing.

Not nothing. I heard: it was a beach, or shore,

and some one far off, walking.

Nowhere familiar. Somewhere I've been before

It always takes a long time

to decipher where you are. (104)

Revision made the poem stronger and more uncompromising; the death in the draft was described in abstractions and linked with the moon, while the dark final draft seems to end in the netherworld. Only sound (raw material of poetry and transformation) remains

as ~~while~~ the speaker waits ~~in~~ like a tower in darkness to find her bearings.

Phase V: Alchemical Power

The story of Eros and Psyche continues with the return to the upper world of Psyche, who almost is trapped in the underworld since, giving in to curiosity like Pandora, she opens the casket of beauty ointment, hoping to make herself more attractive to Eros. Eros saves her, and their divine marriage or *hieros gamos* symbolically unites heaven and earth. Psyche is made divine, and the union issues in the birth of a divine female child named Pleasure. But Apuleius's story of Eros and Psyche is a tale within a tale. An old woman is telling the story of Eros and Psyche to console a young girl who has been kidnapped on

her wedding day by robbers who hope for a ransom from her parents. Apuleius's frame story is a veiled version of Hades' rape of Persephone; the inner tale is a humanized version of the myth. The old woman who tells the tale is from Thessaly, home of witches, Hecate, and the pre-Hellenic mother goddess. Apuleius's novel ends with his own initiation into the rite of Isis; the ritual involves a symbolic death, journey to the underworld moving through four elements, return, and redemption from death (Neumann 145–47).

Apuleius's organization, like Atwood's, consists of a pattern repeated in several dimensions, including time and space (the world of the gods, or spiritual rebirth, is imagined as above the world—in space, as it were—and deathless). Psyche, now immortal, becomes an exemplar of Aphrodite's alchemical vision: autonomous, she is involved in a love relationship. She may be understood as the type of a female artist; her immortal child is the creative work. In "alchemical" fashion, storytelling choreographs movements of the spirit. This alchemical power is imagined as a result of a long effort to purify the self from the "base metal"—in contemporary terms, of one's neuroses and victimization—and gain sufficient traction in the world to freely choose one's own destiny. The four stages previously described are a way of imagining the cycle of growth. The seeds have been sorted and the priorities established. Planted, they will yield life. The wool of the rams of the sun has become threads woven into patterns fit for use, like a nest or womb protecting the seed. The waters of life from the crystal flask water the seed, the crystal suggesting the seed's spiritual nature. The descent into the underworld and return recalls the plant driving its roots downward firmly in many root paths, asserting its place and right to thrive. From this firm unseen foundation the plant rises and bears fruit.

The last section is told in a vulnerable human voice, rather than the voices of mythic or pop culture personae. Having undergone a figurative descent and depression by accompanying her dead father to the underworld in her imagination, the speaker has returned with new, as it were, alchemical powers over dimensions of time and space. These powers ripen over the last sequence of nine poems; at first the gift of new vision is frightening, and the speaker is obsessively drawn to sites that retain traces of unresolved death. Gradually, the poetic gift is harnessed, issuing in a reevaluation of the past, a new acceptance of mortality, and a deepened appreciation of the possibilities that remain. In some ways these poems answer the questions about devastation in

the world that were raised by the third section. This sequence suggests art's power to transform life by retelling it with new stories that substitute for the old while retaining their structures. Death and loss cannot be changed, but they can be transformed in our awareness, and this transformation has its own invisible power that radiates out in time and space.

"Vermillion Flycatcher, San Pedro, Arizona" offers a vision of timeless destruction in a streambed after a flash flood (rivers and drowning here, as in the icy ravine's stream in *Cat's Eye* that flows from the cemetery, suggest death and the past). The bird introduces the possibility of song; however, it "conjures" and, with its mate, focuses on "rapture." The fiery red bird embodies the new alchemical state, the self purified by fire. The bird suggests the need to follow one's own dream: "Birds never dream, being their own. / Dreams, I mean" (107–8). In "The Moment" the desire to own and conquer is seen as a response to existential terror. "Up" sees the future as outer space. The speaker wakes up "filled with dread" and cannot get up out of the "crumpled sheets" like "jungle / foliage":

What prevents you? The future. The future tense,
immense as outer space.
You could get lost there.
No. Nothing so simple. The past, its density
and drowned events pressing you down . . . (110)

The poem ends with a riddle like a koan that cuts to the heart of the alchemical vision. One must absolve oneself, reject the toxic devaluation of self that one has introjected:

Now here's a good one: you're lying on your deathbed
You have one hour to live.
Who is it, exactly, you have needed
all these years to forgive? (110–11)

This last section of Atwood's book explores the alchemy of destruction and creation. "Girl Without Hands" imagines a victimized double of the speaker's self. Since we victimize ourselves, the victimized part needs to absolve the victimizer. If she reached out to touch you, despite her "absent hands," you would "feel nothing / but you would be / touched all the same" (113). One needs to be an archaeologist of one's

own life, and to touch, and allow oneself to be touched by, aspects of one's victimized, buried self lying in one's own river of the past. The way back is also the way forward out of depression and stasis. "You can go no farther than this, / you think, walking forward" (112–13). In this poem the speaker also forgives herself for surviving the father's death. "The Signer" imagines her art in the hands of the signer who translates Atwood's poems into sign language like the weaving of destiny by the female fates. In their patterns art, artist, and translator are

practicing
for the place where all the languages
will be finalized and
one (114–15)

This poem restores the "lost syllable for 'I' that did not mean separate" from "Marsh Language" in section three (54). The last four poems excavate the past and reveal its pain and promise. "A Fire Place" reminds us that, for the earth, destruction and creation can be all one process, as, after a burn, new forests emerge. The earth is a model of transformation, "furrowing, cracking apart, bursting / into flame" (116–17). "Statuary" envisions the weathering down of the past self until its atoms merge with universal forces.

"Shapechangers in Winter" introduces the first love poem to the collection. Its placement suggests that authentic love is only possible after the authentic, integral self has been activated. The poem's first title was "Shapechangers in Snowstorm," and an alternative title was "Shapechangers at Solstice." The final title is simpler and focuses attention on aging and mortality, seen as winter envisioned as outer space (both death and the future). The longhand rough draft contains the kernel of the poem in its beginning. Words in parentheses were crossed out and added ones underlined:

Through the open window, the wind
comes in & flows around us, nothingness
in motion. the enormous power of what is not there You could read it as
indifference, on the part of the universe or else a relentless
forgiveness.

Holding hands like children,
we step across.

The walls of the house fold themselves down, & the house
turns itself inside out, as a tulip does, its last
 full blown
moment of ecstasy, & our candle
flares & goes out, & the only common
sense that remains to us is touch
 (skin) (Atwood Papers)

The rough draft continues with a flashback by recalling their shape-shifting pasts as younger selves (that is, younger bodies) and past moments of intimacy when the two were “lithe as pythons.” The third stanza of this rough draft was moved to the end of the published version. It imagines the snowstorm and gathering dark of approaching death that obliterates individuality, and concludes that, despite these destructive elements,

we will be able to say, when its even darker
than it is now, when its moonless, when the snow is colder,
when it's darkest and coldest, and candles are no longer
any use to us, and the visibility is zero (and the only sense
that remains is touch,) yes.
It's still you. It's still you. (Atwood Papers)

In both rough draft and final version the speaker and her beloved are at the center of an infinite circle embracing roots and stars, and are themselves only one shape among younger selves likened to shifting shapes: bears, foxes, and snakes, which could also be constellations (there is a movement into the heavens, paralleling Psyche's attainment of the divine). However, the draft version ended with the descriptions of shape-shifting. The final, printed version places the shape-shifting in the middle. By moving the powerful early stanzas previously quoted to the end, the love is made to seem a dynamic outcome of the shape-shifting, which is revealed to be deeply transformative. "It's still you. It's still you" now coming at the end resonates like an echo or bell in the chill snow. The doubled "you" takes on multiple meanings, and the ego-driven "I" of the first section vanishes. It has taken the speaker the whole book to arrive at this vision of an Eros, who is envisioned as a person and also as a creative, empowered force (the two readings duplicating the two versions of Eros in ancient myth, one abstract and one concrete). Eros appears at the very scene of past destruction and

makes it flower, like the reforestation in “A Fire Place.” The final version clarifies this connection: “Taking hands like children / lost in a six-dimensional / forest, we step across” (124). This other is envisioned as someone the speaker can hold hands with as she steps across a threshold into the future—into another dimension—folding the house of the past down in an image reminiscent of collapsing a carton, one she had used in much earlier poems, including “Small Cabin” (*SP* I, 120) and “Two Fires” (*SP* I, 88–89).

The final poem, “Morning in the Burned House,” presents the striking image of the speaker as a divine child. Her family is gone, but their “clothes are still on the hangers”—perhaps they are “off along the shore” where the dead father’s footsteps crunched on gravel in “The Ottawa River by Night.” The scene takes place simultaneously in the past (the house is burning) and in the future (when the “body I have now” will have “long been over”). It is an image of loss and also freedom. All times are present, as seen in her “bare child’s feet on the scorched floorboards,” her “burning clothes,” and “cindery, non-existent, / radiant flesh. Incandescent” (126–27). The burning child is a powerful alchemical image of rebirth that illuminates the darkness of the underworld like a torch. In this last moment of the volume, the speaker accepts destruction as a part of creation. Time and mortality are revealed as the burning that consumes her, her childhood house, the forest, and loved ones. Yet all that is loved and lost is like the dross that, kindled in the *athanor* or alchemist’s vessel, creates meaning. The poem sounds the ancient, elegiac *ubi sunt* theme: “Where have they gone to, brother and sister, / mother and father?” The lovely, transitory nature of life is then celebrated in crystalline detail recalling Vermeer. Every detail is “clear, / tin cup and rippled mirror.” This poem issues from an imagined, creative space outside time in which everything is already lost and yet found “including the body I had then, / including the body I have now / as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy.” The sensation of being sufficient in oneself, in the midst of destruction, is the mark of rebirth. The burning girl is unknowable to the old self, and the speaker cannot “know if this is a trap or blessing.” This final poem gestures to a new way of being that may be compared to the rebirth granted to spiritual initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries and encoded in later female descent narratives such as that of Eros and Psyche. The title is a metaphysical pun: mourning becomes morning.

Instead of merely describing a quest into the unknown, the poems constitute this journey. Text and journey, subjective and objective

reality, upper and underworlds are not sharply defined by modernist binary oppositions. The speakers are sometimes human, sometimes animal, sometimes tricksters; their words can be songs, cries, or tricks. Powerful structures, magical boxes like the one that Psyche was sent to retrieve from the world of the dead, these poems pose challenges and trials in themselves. They are active participants, catalysts in the alchemical process. The poems' strategies and deployment are experimental and self-questioning, and draw on what poet Kathleen Fraser has called a female poetic "tradition of marginality." Fraser rejects mainstream confessional and rhetorical modes associated with Lowell and Plath, as well as highly personal poetry associated with feminism; her influential magazine *HOW(ever)*, which published avant-garde feminist poetry from 1983 to 1992, furthered spatially, linguistically oriented, inventive avant-garde feminist poetry that takes its cue from Gertrude Stein and Charles Olson. Fraser suggests that feminist poetry, having been excluded from most canons, tends toward innovation if it is authentic. However enduring their themes, Atwood's poems are similarly innovative and self-aware. Though they are reasonably accessible, they wield postmodern tools and lead readers to no firm conclusions or closures. Instead, they pose new problems and open up new recognitions. Never programmatic, her poems exist as psychic steps toward an alchemical vision. In particular, her recent poems about older women trace pivotal moments, such as the death of a beloved, and suggest unexplored possibilities and strategies for further creative development.



In the same folder as the draft manuscripts of the poems that went into *Morning in the Burned House* are four small mythological sketches on lined notepaper torn from a small booklet. They suggest the search for rebirth of the female through art that lies at the heart of this volume. Since drafts of some of the poems in *Morning in the Burned House*, such as "Sad Child," are written on similar paper and they are archived together, they may be of interest. At the least, we know that Atwood was in an artistic phase, having around this time supplied original watercolors and sketches for *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994), a compilation of texts for the American market drawn from her previous works of prose poetry and flash fiction, *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and *Good Bones* (1992).

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 1 depicts a female figure with waving hair and a long spiraling tail, who holds the letter *a* in one hand and an apple in the other, as if she were displaying the phonetic sound of the first letter of the alphabet. Her scales are sketched like letters, and *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, and *f* trail down the point of her eel-like tail. This sketch resembles a sketch Atwood supplied for *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (58), and Atwood gave it a title not used in that volume: "The Invention of the Alphabet" (Wilson 24; Atwood letter to Nan [Talese]). It is relevant to recall that Aphrodite was associated with apples, especially golden ones, and pomegranates, as was Persephone (Bolen 233, 263–64).

Figure 2 offers another mythical female figure like a harpy perched on a large egg. It has many feathers, definite wings, and a fluffy tail; perhaps it hatched from such an egg. This picture suggests the self nurturing its own rebirth. It is a substantial egg that casts a shadow, and the harpy, though smaller, is perched assertively on the egg in the pose of a sphinx. This sketch is similar to one with the unused title "Hen Brooding on Cosmic Egg," one of ten illustrations in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (Atwood letter to Nan [Talese]; qtd. in Wilson 24). Atwood considers "Hen Brooding on Cosmic Egg" to be the "real title" of this sketch (personal communication with the author, December 13, 2004).

Figure 3

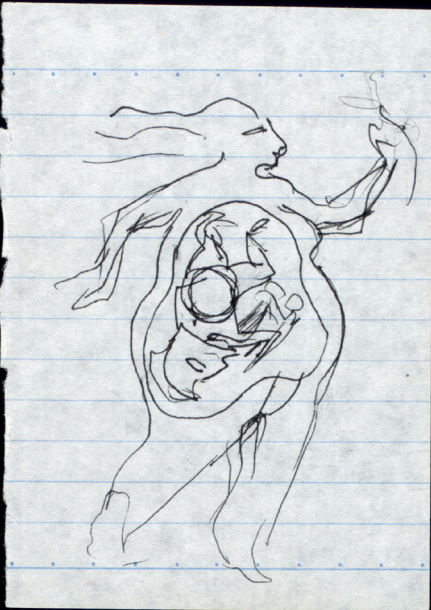


Figure 4



Figure 3 shows a statuesque and pregnant goddess with flowing hair who holds up a torch or spear in her left hand. She wears what seem to be boots. A warrior crouches upside-down within her womb wearing full armor and a helmet, and holding a sword and a shield. The sketch may be an inversion of the birth of Athena, who was supposed to have sprung full grown and armed from Zeus's brow. The idea also reverses Greek myths in which the patriarch Cronos swallowed his children, the Olympian gods, in fear of a prophecy that one of them would dethrone him. Pregnancy is depicted, in this perhaps ironic sketch, as a magical and heroic state.

Figure 4 depicts a large egg cracking, sitting on a coiled snake whose tongue flickers. Both the tongue and the cracking egg open to emit letters or sounds that float into the air, in loosely alphabetical sequence moving from *a* to *e*. The letters are reminiscent of rhyme schemes of poetry: *aaabbcbb* and so on. They seem to disperse into the sky. In the bottom right is a coiled snake with a woman's head that looks back on a large egg. The snake/woman seems to be nurturing this egg, which hatches into song.

Notes

1. Reorderings of tables of contents, Atwood Papers, Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto, MS Coll. 200, Box 163, Folder 5.
2. Known as Venus in later Rome, Aphrodite ruled over sexual love and beauty in ancient Greece and was connected with the Middle Eastern Great Goddess, known as Inanna, Ishtar, and Astarte, who, like Aphrodite, consorted with the dying god Adonis (Attis). See Graves (28).
3. Numerous scholars, notably the Hungarian classicist Kerenyi, have detailed the interweaving of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the story of Persephone, and also Pandora, whom he identifies with Hecate, the pre-Greek queen of Hades (232). Bolen follows Erich Neumann in identifying the myth of Amor (or Eros) and Psyche as the archetypal female quest.
4. Later Greek myth demotes Eros to Aphrodite's companion and son by an uncertain father (Graves 17). Roman authors preserve both of these versions. In one, Eros issues from the egg of Night and is the progenitor of Gaea (Earth) and Pontus (Sea); in another version Eros is the arrow-shooting son of Venus. This duality—which enables storytellers to personify the creative force as a human being—was continued by Bulfinch, whose mid-nineteenth-century version has been most influential and is still in print today.
5. The Platonic philosopher Lucius Apuleius (c. 124–170 C.E.) included the tale of Eros and Psyche in the work he titled *Metamorphoses*, and which we know as *The Golden Ass*, where it forms books 4 through 6. Other imitations are by William Morris—in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70)—and Robert Bridges in 1885 and 1894.
6. This and all subsequent page numbers of poems refer to Atwood, *Morning in the Burned House* (1995).
7. This poem distills much of the character and vulnerability of Tony, the female historian interested in warfare in *The Robber Bride*. Materials including first publication appear in the Atwood Papers, Box 163, Folder 1.
8. Letters regarding this period are to be found in the Atwood Papers, Box 6, Folder 2.
9. Atwood Papers. References to the manuscript of “Gathering,” as well as “In the Secular Night” and other poem drafts, are to Box 163.
10. It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into Atwood's methods of revision or multiple drafts in detail. Discussion is confined to the earliest longhand manuscripts found in the Atwood Papers, Box 163, Folder 5.

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PART III



Spiritual Adventuring by Other Contemporary Women Writers

CHAPTER 7



“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”

Fay Weldon’s Elder Fairy Tale

ROBERTA RUBENSTEIN

Like a number of Fay Weldon’s female protagonists, Felicity Moore of *Rhode Island Blues* is the veteran of several unhappy marriages and a number of pregnancies, including daughters both legitimate and illegitimate, as well as two abortions. She has lived an unintentionally adventurous life, including stretches as the wife of a poor chicken farmer who, inconveniently, had another wife; as a “good-time” girl on a Georgia riverboat; and as the wife of a wealthy, closeted gay man. At times she frets about her physical appearance, particularly when she discovers that she is attracted to a man considerably her junior in age. During the course of the narrative, Felicity rediscovers romance, love, and commitment to her own future as she opens herself to exploration of a new relationship. *Rhode Island Blues* incorporates several fairy-tale motifs, including a wicked stepmother (or two), a figurative prince who frees the figurative princess from her prison, and a happily-ever-after ending.

There is a crucial distinction, however, between Felicity and Weldon’s other female protagonists: she is eighty-three years old. When the novel begins, Felicity feels—after four years of widowhood following the death of her third husband—that life holds few appealing options for a woman her age. She is, as she phrases it, “bored to hell. I keep waiting for something to happen but happenings seem to have run out. Is it my age?” (3). Although she is economically independent, she concedes after suffering a mild stroke that she’s “too old to live alone” (7). Following a conventional script for women of her age and circumstance—but also guided by an auspicious hexagram from the Chinese

book of wisdom, the *I Ching*—she proceeds to sell her house and move to a retirement/nursing home, the upscale Golden Bowl Complex for Creative Retirement in Rhode Island.

Unlike most of the residents of the Golden Bowl,¹ Felicity is far from “elderly” in either behavior or attitude. Not only is she still attractive and attentive to her physical appearance, but she also retains a vital sense of life’s possibilities, despite the attempts of the punitive and ironically named Nurse Dawn, the wicked stepmother of the nursing home, to infantilize residents by undermining their sense of personal independence. Through the unctuous nurse, Weldon directs a healthy measure of satire toward the hypocrisies of retirement “homes.” The tone of the place where residents are known as “Golden Bowlers” (35) is one of relentless cheer, though not without a satirical edge: “We like everyone to be happy, our cups half-full not half-empty” (233). Its philosophy is superficially based on Jungian psychology: residents, who are carefully selected for their robust health and probable longevity, are encouraged to pursue self-improvement and spiritual growth because “the soul needs nourishment as much as does the body” (47). Once they have taken up residence, their families are “encouraged to hand over complete responsibility. Over-loving relatives could be more damaging to an old person’s morale, more detrimental to the Longevity Index, than those who were neglectful” (15). Nurse Dawn cynically observes to herself that “as for Felicity, sooner or later something would happen to bring her to her senses and a proper sense of gratitude. A hip or a knee that needed replacing, arthritis in the hands, a disabling loss of memory, and she would cease to be independent: she would become like everyone else in the twilight of their days, and not think herself so special. Time was on Nurse Dawn’s side: the great advantage the young have over the old” (106).

Ironically, it is only after Felicity gives up living independently that she begins to challenge the implications of Nurse Dawn’s cynical view of old age. At a funeral she attends soon after moving to the retirement home, she is attracted to a thrice-married widower, William Johnson, a man eleven years her junior who also has an unorthodox and colorful personal history. Like women of any age who are drawn toward a new romantic relationship, Felicity must examine her own emotions and erotic feelings and evaluate the authenticity of her suitor’s attentions. Through her growing attraction to William, Felicity recognizes that “what she’d been missing . . . was the consciousness of some secret level of the self where things more important than the rational mind

would ever know took place, to do with the wheeling galaxies and the purposes of the life force" (109). In support of Felicity's exploration of romance and the degree of control she—or anyone—actually has over her destiny, Weldon interpolates at various points in the narrative views from Carl Jung and the *I Ching* regarding chance, synchronicity,² and the relationship between the outer and the inner life. The first instance of synchronicity is the fact that Felicity's vagrant, estranged stepson, at whose funeral she meets William Johnson, was married to William's stepdaughter.

Aspects of the inner life are suggested through the "mirror on the wall," which Felicity first encounters when she moves into the room of a recently deceased resident of the Golden Bowl. Weldon's presentation of the mirror's function is key to the novel as a whole: the looking glass may distort what it reflects; additionally, it may reveal inner as well as outer states of the subject reflected from its sometimes duplicitous surface. As Weldon suggests through Felicity's reflections (in both senses of the word), one can control the meaning of the mirror's images through a firm grasp of one's psychic or spiritual identity. The doctor who manages the retirement home is superstitious about mirrors: "supposing the new occupant looked in the mirror and saw the former occupant looking out. . . . [Mirrors] retained memory; they had their own point of view" (17). Indeed, when Felicity first looks into the mirror in her room, she has a brief but disturbing vision of an "elderly man" (72) returning her glance; shocked, she looks away. A second glance into the mirror reassuringly reveals her own image. "That of course was bad enough. You looked into a mirror as a young woman and your reflection looked out at you as one who was old. So what, honestly, was the big deal if the one looking out had changed sex as well? The shock of the stranger in the mirror was with you every time you looked into one. So why worry? . . . Better to conclude that the unexpected face in the mirror was a projection of one's own fears rather than some occult phenomenon" (72–73).

The uncanny "stranger in the mirror" whose image is quickly replaced by a more familiar one is a phantasm—a psychic projection of something unfamiliar because it is not acknowledged as "self."³ As Felicity's relationship with William Johnson begins to take on the signs of romantic courtship, she distances herself from reflections of her aging body, preferring to regard the mirror as a "magic mirror" that "threw back your soul to you, and not your looks."⁴ Recalling the authoritative looking glass in the fairy tale of Snow White, Felicity

silently pleads, “*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who deserves love most of all? Me, me, me. Just one last time. Please*” (120). She also recognizes the mirror’s variability, a reflection of her own varying states of mind and feelings. Despite the fact that she is chronologically an octogenarian, “It didn’t feel like it, emotionally: apparently you learned nothing when it came to affairs of the heart. You started afresh in folly every time. Look in the mirror, and you always saw something different; sometimes you saw the spirit of yourself, perfectly fresh and youthful: sometimes you saw corrupted flesh” (121). At one point, the mirror reminds her that at her age she would be foolish to regard herself as among “the fairest of them all”; moreover, “if that was what the mirror did ever tell you, everyone hated you: you became wicked witch to Snow White. And besides, it didn’t last: good looks were all anxiety and disappointment: she had given up worrying years ago” (188). Later, as Felicity and William move tentatively toward sexual intimacy, their eyes are truly mirrors into their souls. “He leaned over her, his old eyes looking into her yet older ones, into a mirror which threw back only pleasant sights, livened by the unexpected” (165).

Over the course of the narrative, the changing reflections in the looking glass may be understood to illustrate Felicity Moore’s psychological and spiritual growth. According to Kathleen Woodward, who theorizes a “mirror stage” in old age that is complementary to the Freudian and Lacanian “mirror stage” of infancy, “in the old age our culture has constructed we desire our mirror image to function as does *trompe l’oeil*, to reveal itself precisely *not* as what it so shockingly presents to us as ourselves. . . . The I or ego which is developed in the mirror stage of infancy is structured precisely to resist the anxiety of bodily fragmentation. In old age, with one’s position reversed before the mirror, the ego finds it more difficult to maintain its defenses” (68). The reflections in Felicity’s mirror also function as reflectors of the stages of her spiritual growth, evolving from the image of Other—a male “stranger in the mirror”—to Self: a woman who comes to know and act upon her deepest inner knowledge and intuition. Given the Jungian allusions that appear elsewhere in the novel, the male figure may also be understood as the *animus*, the complementary double/opposite whose integration into the female personality is a necessary step toward spiritual wholeness.⁵

Only once in the narrative does a mirror reflection unexpectedly lead Felicity to regard not her body image but a mental image—the most painful memory of her life. Significantly, the process of recovering

that deeply buried memory occurs at the point when the relationship between Felicity and William has reached its moment of greatest risk. William has cautioned Felicity that there is something about him that she must know before she responds to his proposal of marriage. He drives her to a Native American–operated casino in the Connecticut woods whose turrets and towers suggest a fairy-tale castle created by Disney. There, he admits to her that this is his other love: gambling.

Instead of reacting directly, Felicity finds her attention drawn inward to the memory of a time shortly before her mother died during the 1918–19 influenza epidemic. Though she cannot remember her mother's name, she recalls her mother's mirrored dressing table, which contained several personal items invested with powerful emotional associations. In particular, she recalls her mother's hairnets, which she would "stretch . . . between her hands and look at the world through them: a fine crisscross of brown between her and reality, distorting it but softening it." Recalling her mother's cautionary words that the nets were delicate and could be easily broken, Felicity realizes that she has, until now, forgotten her mother's name because she had "gone away and left her child without protection. . . . Sylvia, of course, that was her name. Then Lois had taken over and within a day the dressing table was cleared and there was a stepmother in her mother's bed" (196). In some ways Felicity has continued to view the world through the distorting but softening scrim of her long-vanished mother's hairnet.

William, noting the tears on Felicity's cheeks, fears that the revelation of his gambling habit has distressed her. She responds, "I'm crying because my mother died" (196). Psychologically, it is as if the new possibility of love and trust and intimacy has prompted Felicity to allow into consciousness the long-repressed memory of the lost first object of love—the mother who abandoned her through death—and to make peace with the absence that so colored her subsequent life. Much of what happened after her mother's death was directly related to that incalculable loss, including emotional abuse at the hands of the wicked stepmother who replaced her dead mother in her father's bed and her rape at the age of fifteen by her stepmother's brother, whose denial of responsibility was believed while Felicity's version of events was scornfully dismissed.⁶

Readers learn such details of Felicity's story incrementally, in part through her own eyes and in part through those of her well-intentioned but at times self-serving granddaughter. Sophia, a thirty-two-year-old film editor based in London, is—like a number of Weldon's younger

protagonists—in flight from the past but, ironically, far more preoccupied with it than is Felicity. Ambivalently, Sophia both fears emotional commitment and longs for attachment, wishing for the family that she never had. Though she has a tenuous relationship with the Hollywood director of several of the films that she edits, she is reluctant to admit to a significant emotional attachment, telling herself instead that Harry Krassner merely sleeps in her bed after their collaborative work on his film ends each day to save himself the inconvenience of staying in a hotel. Thus, belatedly responding to a request urging her to come to the United States to see her ailing grandmother who has just suffered a mild stroke, Sophia wonders, “Perhaps I had come not so much to rescue Felicity as to escape emotional entanglement” (23).

Sophia’s strategy for distancing herself from emotional experiences is film: not only does she edit films professionally but she also escapes into them, finding them less messy and much more reliable than real life. As she phrases it, “Real life is all subtext, never with a decent explanation, no day of judgement to make things clear” (4). Later, she elaborates on this distinction, claiming that “[r]eal life is unsatisfactory, there’s no resolving anything properly . . . murder doesn’t always out: the only ‘end’ is death. Films at least offer resolutions and answers, and solutions, the boring bits edited out” (153). Pertinently, she is currently working on films with such suggestive wish-fulfillment titles as *Tomorrow Forever* and *Hope against Hope*. She often recasts her own and others’ experiences in terms of movie classics in which the outcome is clear.

Like a good film editor, Sophia attempts to splice together and thus reconstruct her family history based on details she uncovers. First, to her surprise, she learns from Felicity—who has determined that she has reached the age where she is “old enough to speak the truth” (1)—that her grandmother had an illegitimate child “before I had your mother. . . . That was in London, back in the thirties. I wasn’t married. That made me a bad girl. They made me keep the baby for six weeks, and breast-feed, then they took her away, put her out for adoption” (53). The orphaned Sophia, curious and longing for other relatives, engages a private detective agency to find out what happened to Felicity’s child. She discovers that the child—her great-aunt Alison, who is now in her sixties—lives in a nursing home near London; incapacitated by Alzheimer’s disease, she can offer Sophia little in the way of family connection or insight. Indeed, real life offers a less satisfactory denouement to this particular strand of family history than would a film version. Having learned the sordid crisis of her grandmother’s adolescence,

Sophia imagines Felicity's rape by her step-uncle as a "film narrative in [her] head" (156) that concludes with "*Cut away to long shot. You know the dismal rest*" (157).

Sophia also locates her grandmother's younger half-sister, Lucy, who is able to supply more details about Felicity's youth. Through her, Sophia learns that Felicity's stepmother, Lois, had totally rejected the pregnant Felicity. In a response typical of the time, she blamed the victim, regarding her pregnant stepdaughter as "a moral imbecile . . . dirty, disgusting and lewd." According to Lucy, Lois threw Felicity out of the house and deposited her at the door of a home for unwed mothers "as if she were an abandoned baby and not an abandoned mother" (158). There, on her fifteenth birthday, Felicity gave birth to Alison and soon afterward gave her up for adoption. As Sophia comments, "the truth turned out to be even more dramatic than I would have dared suppose, and being reported by a seventy-five-year-old out of the memory of the child she once was, had already been conveniently turned into a shaped narrative: a tragedy, as it happened. . . . [A] happy ending for Felicity was not within the scheme of her universe" (144). In an observation that underscores the novel's fairy-tale motifs as well as its deliberate attention to the constructed "story" of any life, Sophia concludes, "The Fates have a way of doling out the same hand of cards to a woman, over and over. The cackling sisters had decided that Felicity was to get some pretty nice cards sprinkled with a few really nasty ones bound to mess the others up. They sent along a Fairy Godmother to the christening to give looks, charm, energy, courage, wit—then took away her parents, gave her Lucy's mother Lois for a wicked stepmother, brought Lois's brother Anton into the household, [and] obliged her to give away her perfect baby" (145).⁷

The other woman who links Sophia to her grandmother is Felicity's legitimate daughter from her first marriage: Sophia's mother, Angel, who died by suicide in a mental hospital at the age of thirty-five when her only child was ten. Sophia still nurses a sense of maternal loss and emotional emptiness. She feels as if the "sepulchral figure" of her mad mother "stands between [herself] and Felicity, damming up the flow of family feeling" (2). As Sophia delves more deeply into the secrets of her family history, she discovers other relatives she never knew she had and realizes that her feelings of abandonment are part of a repeating pattern: just as Sophia's own mother died during her early childhood, Felicity's mother died of influenza when Felicity was an even younger child.

Later, Sophia discovers still another twist in her tangled family

history: Felicity's first husband was not the father of her child (Sophia's mother). Rather, when Felicity married an American GI based in England during World War II, she was pregnant by a folk singer who lived in London's Soho district. She went to Georgia to live with her American husband on what he told her was his plantation, which in fact was a dirt-poor chicken farm. To add insult to injury, he already had another wife as well as another child. Though Sophia is fascinated by these discoveries about her family history, Felicity wishes that her granddaughter would leave well enough alone rather than dredging up additional details of her painful and at times sordid past.

What prompts Felicity's orientation toward the present—and the future—is her developing relationship with William Johnson. Others, including Felicity's former neighbor with the comically ironic name of Joy, are convinced that William is simply a con man and "sponger" (133), the kind of man who preys on susceptible older women and whose real interest is their bank accounts. At times Felicity herself worries about William's motives, even as—in the habit of a much younger woman—she orders by mail cosmetics, face creams, and lingerie that she hopes will make her appear more attractive. The two meet every day through an arrangement that resembles a secret assignation: Felicity persuades the man who is employed as Joy's chauffeur to secretly convey William from his retirement home in nearby Mystic, Connecticut, to hers each day while Joy is napping. The brief afternoon visits temporarily elude even the watchful eyes of the grim Nurse Dawn and the staff of the Golden Bowl. In another comic touch, the chauffeur, a Yugoslavian refugee, marvels at the liaison he helps to facilitate: "Only in the United States . . . would the old have health and energy enough thus to complicate their lives. It gave him a sense of future. He might even give up smoking[,] the better to fit in" (119–20).

In William's loving eyes, Felicity feels herself alive again, even as she recognizes the risk and the impermanence of such feelings: "But while it lasted, how magic was the exhilaration, the exultation, the sense of being properly alive. Just one more time, and this time let me get it right. True love. Could it be that if you just hung round for long enough, your faith intact, it happened? When you least expected it, there it was at last." By contrast, in the presence of the life-squelching Nurse Dawn, Felicity feels "old and useless again, and slightly dotty, since that was how Nurse Dawn saw her" (124).

The most delicately realized dimension of Weldon's elder fairy tale is her treatment of sexuality, which she renders with both sensitivity

and genial humor. When Felicity first returns to the Golden Bowl after having met William, she is in such "high spirits" that Nurse Dawn is concerned, fearing that such "inappropriate emotions could indicate the onset of dementia" (103). Later, Felicity ponders the nature of desire at her age, concluding that "lust . . . was not the prerogative of the young: as you got older desire presented itself in a different form . . . as a restless sense of dissatisfaction, which out of sheer habit you had the feeling only physical sex would cure. It was generated in the head, not the loins, the latter these days admittedly a little dried up, and liable to chafing rather than the general luscious overflowing which had characterized their prime" (108).

For three weeks after their first meeting, Felicity and William, separated by a table in Felicity's room that signifies the "no-man's land between desire and fear of consequences" (124), "debrief" (129) each other by sharing details of their histories, interests, and tastes. As they move gingerly toward intimacy, Felicity realizes the awkward path they must navigate: "Bad enough at twenty to work out how to proceed from physical distance to physical intimacy: how to move from the chair to the sofa, from the sofa to the bed: fifty, sixty years on and the problem was back again" (130). Along with such strategic difficulties, they must face the limits of their aging bodies. William's hands are, like Felicity's own, "wrinkled and liver-spotted" (131).

Further, Felicity wonders whether the "electrical charge" she feels when William first sits next to her can be trusted: "She could be wrong about it: he could be teasing her, manipulating her cruelly. She could be making a fool of herself. Maybe all this was in her head?" Nonetheless, she proposes that they "lie together on her bed" for the innocuous reason that "sitting up straight for so long quite tires [her] out." Immediately, she feels that she has been too hasty. William, revealing his own anxiety, responds, "I'm an old man. I'll only disappoint you" (131), and prepares to leave. Ultimately, however, they overcome the almost comic awkwardness of the situation and end up on Felicity's bed. Remaining fully clothed like timid adolescents on the brink of their first sexual experience, they confide to each other further details of their earlier lives and loves, "flesh touching, albeit the other side of fabric. The denim of his jeans, the silk of her skirt: her legs still long and shapely, the skin no longer taut, blotchy; a blue network of veins beneath the ankles. How much did it matter? What had love ever been about? The spirit or the flesh?" (133). On a later occasion, William's hand sometimes "strayed to [Felicity's] breast, to find out more about

it, and for once she wished she had her former body back: it was as if now the power of her will was obliged to sustain her physical existence and keep proving it: whereas once the body had run off so boldly with the self, taking over: the firm bosom, the bouncy flesh, flying ahead of the will, having to be restrained" (165).

At one point, distressed by her feeling of entrapment not only within the confining and life-denying rules of the Golden Bowl but also within her aging body, Felicity laments, "as you got older the sense that the spirit was incarcerated in the body became more intense. . . . [However], it was not the Golden Bowl which kept you in one place against your will, it was your body, now reluctant to run, jump, and skip" (240). Sex at her and William's ages, she concludes, must be understood more as "a token of esteem rather than a source of overwhelming physical pleasure. While she wasn't looking it had ceased to be an all-consuming need" (261).

The fairy-tale romance between Felicity and William has its share of doubts and darker moments. Felicity wonders whether falling in love is simply "a strategy for postponing thoughts of death and the physical and mental decline that led up to it" (245). The decision to marry, a major decision at any age, looms especially large as she ponders what would justify such a commitment for a woman in her eighties. Moreover, like Felicity herself, the reader may wonder how to weigh William's gambling addiction. Though he claims he knows when to quit, he pursues his compulsive pastime on an almost daily basis. According to him, it is a form of playing with chance, of "rolling with destiny" (199). Felicity, with a generosity of spirit conferred by age, ultimately concludes that she has her own less admirable qualities as well and that William's gambling is a form of entertainment that does not take anything away from her. Like any other entertainment, "it was all there was left to do, at the close of life. And who cared about the money?" (199). Gambling is simply another form of risk-taking; according to William, "the greater the risk, the higher the reward" (198). Indeed, that view shapes Felicity's decision to embrace the rare opportunity that life offers her. Welcoming the unexpected "exhilaration of true love" (133) at the age of eighty-three, she feels "lucky," despite the "share of bad luck that had piled up in the first twenty years" (246) of her life.

The deepest point of Felicity's spiritual journey is her recognition that her decision to marry William is not only a celebration of the life force but also a door opening to continued inner growth and the

discovery of the elemental meaning of experience, even at—indeed, despite—her advanced age. As she phrases what she has discovered during her romantic courtship with William, "The old understood better than the young that the foundation of the earth was composed of good and evil, no matter how you struggled to see it in terms of money and sex and luck. The trouble was the old had no words, no language, no real remembrance; what afflicted the soul in the end afflicted the body. The old peered out of rheumy eyes, dimmed by too much exposure to the truth, deafened by a lifetime of lies, bent by the burden of guilt. . . . Age itself was evil, and there was no escaping it. . . . But what else can you do? How else express what you have learned of life . . .?" (271).

The names of Weldon's protagonist, like those of other characters in the novel, amplify the fairy-tale themes: "Felicity" connotes a pleasing manner as well as something that causes or produces happiness, while "Moore" suggests Felicity's desire to live more fully than is conventionally sanctioned for women of her advanced age. Together these meanings enhance the depiction of a character who is rare not only in Weldon's fiction but also in contemporary fiction: one who not only can admit to herself, despite her age, that "she did miss being in love" (108) but who emphatically resists the cultural scripts of aging that assume erotic and emotional diminution.⁸ In *Rhode Island Blues* Weldon provides astringent reminders of the more conventional view. In particular, Felicity's envious (and utterly joyless) seventy-nine-year-old neighbor, Joy, offers a jaundiced view of heterosexual relationships. The veteran of four marriages, she has concluded that "men changed on the day you married them: though they always claimed it was you that did" (90). Convinced that she has little control over what comes her way, Joy regards life as "a long road uphill; you travelled in a vehicle driven by others; it was better to appreciate the scenery than to speculate about what was going to happen when you reached the top and looked down the other side. One of Joy's grandsons played computer games: she'd seen how you could topple down over the edge into a brilliant white nothingness: it had really scared her. These days she saw her own life like this, something almost virtual, perched on the edge of an abyss" (89). Revealingly, Joy is especially critical of Felicity's romantic relationship with William in particular and with erotic desire in older people in general: "People of that age have no business having sex. It's too upsetting for those around. . . . It's shaming, embarrassing and humiliating" (163). By contrast, through Felicity, who is

emotionally rejuvenated and empowered by her willingness to take the risk of intimacy, Weldon suggests that, for those who retain their imaginations along with a measure of wisdom and some flexibility, love knows no chronological limits.

Even the emotionally repressed Sophia is affected by Felicity's *joie de vivre*. Through Felicity's story, which she has successfully pieced together, she comes to see that "one tends to write off women in their mid-eighties as simply hanging around until death carries them away. One is wrong" (140). In her head she hears the voice of a benevolent fairy godmother—her grandmother, Felicity—articulating the life-affirming truth that shapes Weldon's fable: "*Take nothing seriously. It's all fairy tale*" (312, emphasis in original).

However, there is one last twist to the fairy tale. On her final visit to her grandmother, Sophia makes the error of bringing along her two newly discovered cousins: the adult children of Felicity's illegitimate daughter, Alison. It soon becomes apparent that Guy and Lorna are far more interested in Felicity's assets—namely, a painting by Utrillo that she received years before from her wealthy second husband in a divorce settlement—than in the recovery of family ties. Guy asserts to Nurse Dawn his view that it is foolish to leave "a batty old woman in charge of a major work of art, let alone her being in thrall to an unscrupulous gambler" (315). Nurse Dawn, hardly Felicity's ally, suggests that the best strategy would be to have Felicity declared incompetent so that Guy can be named her legal guardian. It is not surprising that Felicity sees a resemblance between Nurse Dawn and her cruel stepmother, Lois, who had disowned her so many years ago. As she remarks to William, "How strange to meet up with her again, after all this time" (271). Felicity also accurately senses that Guy and Lorna—whom she believes must be the evil Lois's grandchildren rather than hers—hope to grab her one valuable possession, her Utrillo. She persuades Sophia to help her hide the painting. Together removing it from the wall of Felicity's room, they wrap it in a quilt and convey it to temporary safety in an empty gardener's shed outside the retirement home, to be reclaimed at the appropriate time. When Guy and his sister come to the Golden Bowl the next day to visit Felicity, they are shocked to discover that both she and the Utrillo have vanished.

Felicity, more interested in the future than the past, further surprises her own granddaughter by promptly selling the valuable painting. Life itself is a gamble, never more so than at her age: she has decided to take her chances with William. "If she divided the money from the

Utrillo and what she already had into ten, that gave them \$400,000 a year to see them out. This was the amount William lost annually, if you averaged out the winning and the losing years. They would spend their days gambling at Foxwoods; and if they lost there would be no sorrow, because they expected to, and if they won they could rejoice" (325).

Sophia, inspired by her grandmother's spirited escape from the retirement home to elope with William, returns to London with a renewed sense of possibility and expansion in her own life. Over the course of her encounters with Felicity, she acquires at least a modicum of the wisdom signaled by her name and a new orientation that, like her grandmother's, is more focused on the future than the past: "I saw that I had extra decades to go, more than I thought. Life elongated before me. I saw it in my head as a kind of special effect . . . paleish [*sic*] green and glowing and stretching into the distance, only slightly uphill: a path. Really there was no hurry to get everything right" (325).



What adds depth and resonance to Weldon's affirmative exploration of love and romance in her old but far from elderly female protagonist is the position of *Rhode Island Blues* within the author's own oeuvre. Now in her mid-seventies herself, Weldon is the author of twenty-six novels. Although her more recent narratives focus satirically on the vagaries of love, marriage, sexual infidelity, and wives' fantasies of revenge, her early novels published during the 1970s depict the hard lives of women during the peak years of courtship, marriage, and childbearing as they endure various aspects of the "female condition."⁹ A female character in one novel of that period, *Down Among the Women*, laments, "There is nothing more glorious than to be a young girl and there is nothing worse than to have been one" (6). In novels that reflect their moment in the history of unequal relations between the sexes, anatomy is indeed destiny: women have little control over either their bodies or their fates; female friendships are fragile because women are economically and emotionally dependent on men. Yet love is fickle and men are neither reliable nor faithful. As a female character from *Praxis*, another of Weldon's novels from the same period, representatively phrases it, "We are betrayed on all sides. Our bodies betray us, leading us to love where our interests do not lie. Our instincts betray us, inducing us to nest-build and procreate—but to follow instinct is

not to achieve fulfillment, for we are more than animals. . . . Our brains betray us, keeping one step, for the sake of convenience, to avoid hurt, behind the male" (205–6).¹⁰

Several decades later, in *Rhode Island Blues*, Sophia—a self-sufficient and economically independent professional woman who is a clear beneficiary of the women's movement—reflects on the restricted lives of women of her grandmother's generation, acknowledging that "even a couple of decades into the [twentieth] century only a very exceptional woman could earn a living wage, other than on her back" (144). Regarding her view of female experience in the decades before feminism, Weldon commented to an interviewer:

In the fifties and sixties we women thought if we were unhappy it could only be our fault. We were in some way neurotic, badly adjusted—it was our task to change ourselves to fit the world. We would read Freud, Helene Deutsch, Melanie Klein (these last two at least being moderately relevant to our female condition), bow our heads in shame in the face of our penis envy, and teach ourselves docility and acceptance. As the seventies approached and we failed to achieve these ends, the great realization dawned—we must change not ourselves but the world! It was not we who were at fault, with our mopes and sulks and hysteria and murderous pre-menstrual rages, it was the world. The world was male. It was only natural, living as we did in a patriarchal society, that we would behave in such a way. So we stopped placating (that is to say smiling) and set out, scowling, to change to world. We worked upon that, not upon ourselves. We become radical separatist, lesbian feminists, or subsections of such, and weren't really nice at all. We stamped hard on male toes, and we liked each other but it was a rare man who liked us. And if he did we despised him for his softness. ("Changing Face" 193–94)

In contrast to virtually all of her earlier female characters, in Felicity Moore of *Rhode Island Blues* Weldon has created an exuberant, risk-taking, *significantly older* woman who dares to follow the dictates of her heart, social norms about old age be damned. One can speculate that, by imagining for the first time a life-affirming protagonist who refuses to feel trapped by either her gender or her advanced age, Weldon has given narrative form to some of her own hopes and wishes—even her fairy-tale fantasies—on behalf of all women who dare to challenge the conventional cultural scripts of aging. More broadly, her novel

succeeds as an attempt to "alter or inflect our experience of aging and advanced old age by changing our representations of it" (Woodward 193). *Rhode Island Blues* may be a fairy tale, but it is a satisfying one: an exuberant and genially comic narrative of an older woman's emotional, spiritual, and, yes, sexual liberation. What distinguishes this particular retelling—complete with the rescue of the princess from her prison and from the wicked witch by her prince, along with a happily-ever-after ending—is the reader's awareness that Weldon has taken the classic tale into decidedly new territory: traditional fairy tales never feature elder (much less octogenarian!) princesses. Fittingly, in a final glance into the magic mirror, Felicity Moore understands what the reflection has been trying to tell her. It offers not only guidance specific to her stage of life but also the moral of Weldon's tale: "Time's short. Don't waste what's left" (293).

Notes

1. Lest readers assume that the reference is to Henry James's novel *The Golden Bowl*, Weldon advises us through Sophia that the original source of the retirement home's name (though the connection is not mentioned in its brochure) is Ecclesiastes:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,
while the evil days come not,
nor the years draw nigh,
when thou shalt say,
I have no pleasure in them;
While the sun,
or the light,
or the moon,
or the stars,
be not darkened,
nor the clouds return after the rain:
... and desire shall fail:
because man goeth to his long home,
and the mourners go about the streets:
or ever the silver cord be loosed,
or the golden bowl be broken at the fountain,
... then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:
and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. (35; ellipses in original)

2. According to Jung, synchronicity is a "'meaningful coincidence' of outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected" (226).

3. According to Kathleen Woodward, a phantasm is a psychic representation that "speaks . . . mysteriously to our fears and desires" (176).

4. Interestingly, in her observations about female aging published more than half a century ago, Simone de Beauvoir wrote presciently about the discrepancy between mirror image and inner self: "When one feels oneself a conscious, active, free being, the passive object on which the fatality [of aging or death] is operating seems necessarily as if it were another. . . . This cannot be I, this old woman reflected in the mirror! . . . The woman puts her trust in what is clear to her inner eye rather than in that strange world where time flows backward, where her double no longer resembles her, where the outcome has betrayed her" (649). Similarly, but more recently, Woodward has noted, "The psyche longs for youth, and the body is an insult and an impediment" (188).

5. In Jungian theory, the *animus*, "the male personification of the unconscious in woman," may appear in different forms, both positive and negative. "The positive side of the animus can personify an enterprising spirit, courage, truthfulness, and in the highest form, spiritual profundity. Through him a woman can experience the underlying processes of her cultural and personal objective situation, and can find her way to an intensified spiritual attitude to life" (198, 206–7).

6. As she has done elsewhere in her fiction, Weldon has drawn some details for *Rhode Island Blues* from her own personal experience or family history. In her autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, she reveals that her aunt Faith was seduced by her aunt's mother's brother when she was seventeen. When the two were discovered together, the uncle was banished from the house, and "Faith was tipped into what would now be called a violent psychotic episode, from which she never recovered. She was locked away, for her own protection and that of others." Her mother "wiped her daughter from her memory: she went, as they would say now, into denial. It was the shock waves from this tragedy which echoed through the generations to disastrous affect [*sic*]. My mother lost her sister, ally and friend, the cohesion of the family was gone: the centre could not hold. Free Love, the creed by which the redheaded uncles also lived, is fine in principle but can be tragic in its consequences" (106–7).

7. Nancy A. Walker observes that Weldon frequently uses fairy-tale motifs in her novels—in most instances ironically, to critique the social attitudes that shape and limit her characters' lives. As she notes, "Weldon's female characters and narrators are obsessive storytellers, modern Mother Geese who spin tales compounded of truth and lies, and then revise these stories in much the same way as fairy tales have undergone revision over time. . . . There is a clear sense that her characters are immersed in a sea of tales—fairy tales, old wives' tales, cultural mythologies, lies they tell themselves and others" (10).

8. In *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette identifies the socially constructed "master narrative of aging" (66) as a pattern of thinking in Western culture that has become so collectively embedded and individually internalized in our perceptions of age and aging, particularly for women, that it is difficult to acknowledge or resist. Though she focuses principally on the culturally reinforced "narrative of decline" that negatively colors "midlife," her observations are valuable for considering the even more limiting scripts that shape expectations for the decades that follow. As Gullette phrases it, "old age in general can be represented as lonely, terrified, boring, sickly, and costly to society. But it is midlife aging that repels women first. Fear of fifty intensifies fear of ninety" (94).

Elsewhere, in "Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age," I explore representations of two older women who find themselves drawn into romantic relationships or infatuations with younger men. However, both Doris Lessing's Sarah Durham of *love, again* (1996) and Marilyn French's Hermione Beldame of *My Summer with George* (1996) are two decades younger than Weldon's Felicity. Carolyn Heilbrun has suggested that there are virtually no imaginative scripts for older women that offer "adventure" without "romance." If there were, "we in our late decades would be able to free ourselves from the compulsion always to connect yearning and sex. If an ancient . . . woman finds herself longing for something new, something as yet not found, must that something always be sex or till-death-do-us-part romance? The reason for the predominance of sexual aspiration, I have decided, is that no other adventure has quite the symbolic force, not to mention the force of the entire culture, behind it" (103).

9. See Weldon's *Down among the Women* (1972), *Female Friends* (1974), and *Praxis* (1978).

10. For a brief overview of novels mentioned in this essay and other novels by Weldon, see Rubenstein, "The Feminist Novel in the Wake of Virginia Woolf," 52–54, 61–62.

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CHAPTER 8



On the Road Again

*Aritha Van Herk's No Fixed Address
and Suzette Mayr's The Widows*

SALLY CHIVERS

Anyone who lives in the city knows it can be a jungle out there some days. But for the elderly or those with illnesses or disabilities, it can be a jungle every day. Simple things such as taking a walk or going to the store can be challenges because of difficulties presented by streets, sidewalks and their surroundings.

—City of Vancouver Web Site

The above-cited passage justifies the city's new "wellness walkways" program—an initiative that incurs great expense to retrofit unnavigable parts of Vancouver for greater mobility. Even better, the words attribute impaired mobility not to supposedly inadequate bodies but to structural—quite literally constructed—constraints, precisely demonstrating how elderly frailty can be socially constructed. Of course, bodies do change at all ages, but it is not so much changed bodies that pose limits to mobility as it is social factors (concrete and discursive) that impose them.

In *The Rejected Body* Susan Wendell explains how such social circumstances construct disability around different bodies: "Aspects of social organization that take for granted the social expectations of performance and productivity, such as inadequate public transportation (which I believe assumes that no one who is needed in the public world needs public transportation) . . . create much disability" (40). Aging citizens face rejection in part because of social standards of utility. Since they may no longer be "productive" participants in the social structure, their mobility is not a major issue. Also, the countless inappropriate

but often automatic interpretations of decay and instability mapped onto older bodies render them best kept out of the public eye, unless as examples presented for momentary pathos. Pervasive social opinion dictates that old people in particular should be static and contained.

A number of popular cultural depictions define old people by their physical confinement. Dickens's Miss Havisham (who is not actually old by any contemporary definition, but who is very often read as elderly) inhabits a home as haunted and mysterious as is her relationship to time. HBO's *The Sopranos* situates the deviously ambiguous Livia Soprano in a nursing home from which she wreaks havoc, perhaps on purpose, perhaps by accident. Such representations match circulating conceptions of old age as a time of restricted space and mobility. What is more, contemporary writers work within and against what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have described as a long literary tradition of confining women spatially and, at most, depicting their escape, psychic or physical, from that confinement along with whatever it may symbolize (85). The combination of gender with age intensifies perceptions of social restrictions (Susan Sontag famously articulates the twofold disempowerment as "the double standard of ageing" in her article of that name). The literary trope of stasis, reinforced by age and gender, represents cultural attitudes toward "othered" bodies whose mobility would threaten general understandings of capacity and utility. Recently, however, particularly in Canadian fiction and contemporary popular film, a distinct trope of elderly women's defiant mobility, often exceeding escape, supersedes outmoded stasis. A large number of works—such as Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, Hugh Garner's *A Trip for Mrs. Taylor*, Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*, Deepa Mehta's *Camilla*, Bruce Beresford's *Driving Miss Daisy*, Cassie Mann's *The Trip to Bountiful*, Cynthia Scott's *The Company of Strangers*, and David Lynch's *The Straight Story*—all depict elderly characters going back on the road, desperately, exuberantly, and gracefully. Because the works expand the narrative element of space more than that of time, these artists develop portrayals that contradict the familiar stereotypes of elderly characters as housebound and left to travel only in memories.

In the consumer-based, "health"-touting set of representations collected under the banner of "successful aging," signs of age can be hidden not by locking elderly people away but through a transformation of their physical form by means of both surgical and nonsurgical interventions. Typical anti-aging skin cream advertisements compel us

to invest in ideas of continued youth, and they never feature older faces in their attempts to sell beauty. Rather, a dewy-complexioned young face stares from the pages of a magazine showing readers what they can never look like again, even if they believe in the pseudoscientific descriptions of the product displayed. The pressure to hide aging intensifies as baby boomers begin to occupy the category of late life.

In this chapter I want to turn to literary constructions of old age as a way to defy the youth-centric imperatives of “successful aging” and to place older women boldly in sight. I have argued elsewhere that contemporary Canadian fiction offers a productive site for rethinking gerontological theories in order to produce a “constructive” approach to old age that is neither relentlessly positive in glossing over the difficulties faced by many in late life nor overwhelmingly gloomy in positing all-encompassing physical decline.¹ Two Canadian novels, Aritha Van Herk’s *No Fixed Address* and Suzette Mayr’s *The Widows*, invest in the possibilities and probabilities of fictional form to imagine a world wherein older women show their wrinkles and embark on literal as well as symbolic journeys. The first depicts a Western Canadian young picaresque crisscrossing prohibitive landscape opting ultimately to drive off the map. The second offers a senescent road trip that counters standard west-bound progress narratives, depicting instead an east-bound trio intent on taking Niagara Falls. Together, both revising a centuries-old picaresque tradition of writing a rogue on the road, these novels speak to a progressive mobility for women and to a world of possibilities for old women.

“Get in the space ship Granny”: The Aging Picaro

Ursula Le Guin writes the essay “The Space Crone” from within her experience of menopause. She addresses the hypothetical situation of an alien culture, which she calls Altairean, coming to earth and asking politely, “We have room for one passenger; will you spare us a single human being, so that we may converse at leisure during the long trip back to Altair and learn from an exemplary person the nature of the race?” Le Guin proposes that instead of finding a brave young man or even a confident young woman, earthlings should seek out “an old woman, over sixty, from behind the costume jewelry counter or the betel-nut booth” (251). She argues that such a woman “has a stock of sense, wit, patience, and experiential shrewdness, which the Altaireans

might, or might not, perceive as wisdom. . . . Since they are curious and kindly, let's give them the best we have to give" (251–52). Le Guin exalts working-class, older women in a careful reconfiguration of cultural value. Whereas women, so frequently associated with the body, are typically perceived to lose value as they change physically, Le Guin assigns old women the highest value on the very basis of those changes and experiences.

Le Guin also situates older women as travelers, contrasting the more typical image of the male traveler on a quest for freedom and self-knowledge. By bringing the betel-nut booth worker out from behind the counter, she raises questions about mobility—physical, social, and cultural. While literal travel has conventionally been the privileged domain of a wealthy elite, metaphorically, travel has connoted self-knowledge and even late life as an arduous yet rewarding process. But as Lisa Chalykoff points out, postmodern advances in geographical thought clarify the importance of distinguishing between physical space and mental space, especially in order to make room for the consideration of social space. She explains: "Social spaces are those we encounter most frequently in daily life. Even our knowledge of that most personal of all spaces—our 'material' bodies—is mediated to us through socially produced epistemes that imbue these intimate spaces with a highly social character" (162). The two literary depictions of older characters traveling that I compare in this article—Aritha Van Herk's *No Fixed Address* and Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*—both imply a literal possibility and allow for a literal reading of old people on the road. However, these two texts also push the limits of recognized textual and geographical narratives and forms, inviting readers to imagine new spaces for old age. In doing so, they re-create a social space of late life, through narrative experiments that bring together typical social readings of older bodies with new interpretations of senescent physical forms.

In "The Road Work of the New American Picaresque," Rowland A. Sherrill explains that new picaresque narratives "cannot presume (or presume to represent) broadly homogeneous social scenes and hierarchically stratified social groupings and cannot either count on readers to recognize social 'types' codified by time and traditions" (5). He points to a shift in depiction that allows a new freedom to move for previously static characters. Though he does not mention them explicitly, his claims imply that elderly characters can break out of traditions that held them firmly in place. Because of what Sherrill perceives as a

new cultural fluidity, the picaresque genre moves beyond its tradition of satire into new forms of cultural critique. As Sherrill puts it, “the new picaresque forges its particular form of cultural response not in satire but in exploration, discovery, and map-making in an America in so many ways become *terra incognita*” (5).

Contemporary works that depict elderly characters on the road *again* do not adhere faithfully to any one particular travel writing form. However, almost all dip, at least momentarily, into the bag of tricks provided to picaros, perhaps because the attendant humor makes easier, however questionably, a depiction of an incongruous traveler on the road. Elderly characters do conform to many requirements of picaros: by virtue of their age and contemporary attitudes toward aging, they have been situated as socially marginal; because utility is reserved for the young, elderly characters have the freedom from responsibility required of picaros. As Sherrill describes it, “The picaro’s exile onto the ambiguous and haphazard twistings of the road, into the life of continuous mobility and encounter, results from his or her sense of marginality, of being or being made ‘eccentric,’ however temporarily, of being pushed to the peripheries and away from the center of American social ‘normalcy,’ however perceived” (“Picaresque Borrowed and Blue” 44). By characterizing old age as a time of “exploration, discovery, and map-making” in literal and figurative senses, novels that feature older picaras revise cultural understanding in the way that Sherrill claims the new American picaresque can. From a marginalized position, contemporary authors challenge the “normalcy” and normativity that heroic novel conventions embrace and (try to) enforce. This essay charts a progression from Van Herk’s younger picara, Arachne Mantia, whose encounters with a much older male lover help clarify her position outside previously charted territories, to Mayr’s three older picaras, Hannelore, Clotilde, and Frau Schnadelhuber, whose tumble down Niagara Falls solidifies the rebellion needed to revise cultural scripts that attempt to hold elderly characters firmly in place.

Out of Bounds: Mapping *No Fixed Address*

Published to great acclaim in 1986, Van Herk’s “amorous journey” rewrites both masculinist travel narratives and masculinist prairie narratives. In an essay titled “Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape,” Van Herk demands, “Name the west’s fiction.

Grove, Mitchell, Ross, Wiebe, Kroetsch. Laurence of course, not so much an afterthought as an anomaly" (139). And she carves a place for herself: "Man and his straight line—steel, yet—horizontal world cannot contain or even predicate the female curve of prairie, let alone enter it" (142). Her picara, the traveling underwear saleswoman Arachne Manteia, circles the prairies and explores their boundaries until the offbeat protagonist drives north off the map into the territory of Van Herk's next book-length work, *Places Far from Ellesmere*.

As Dorothy Jones describes it, in *Arachne*, Van Herk creates "a woman character who voluntarily chooses the role of social outcast, eventually abandoning all idea of living in a house. She thus becomes a measure of that society's limitations, but also a symbol of the creative possibilities which might be released if those limitations are transcended" ("Interview" 10). Arachne's sexual exploits embody her larger sense of exploration and the categories exploded by Van Herk in this relentlessly feminist remapping of the Western Canadian literary landscape. Marlene Goldman explains the resulting positioning of male characters in the novel: "Patterned on the character of the traditional male rogue, Arachne is a sexually casual, itinerant trickster, who, like the class of spiders she is named for, treats men like flies" (27). But the first of many sexual adventures depicted in the novel, one that recurs throughout the section set in Alberta, does not quite fit into that pattern. Arachne initially encounters Josef, an "old buzzard" with "rheumy eyes" (12), at Crowfoot's grave. Immediately struck by his hair, "a spun floss of white, thick and wild" (10), Arachne resents Josef's presence because he also spots a partially buried skull that she wants to keep from prying eyes. She is disgusted by the "reed of his voice" (12), but they first connect when they both reach to touch the relic: "Together they kneel at the mound and touch the bone" (16). Josef's presence allows Arachne a sexual power that rewrites the midlife crisis stereotype of men taking on younger trophy lovers to shore up their masculinity in the face of its supposedly inevitable fading. Their physical connection defies other characters' assumptions about the possibilities of sexual desire. Arachne does not take care of Josef out of sympathy; in fact, she never adopts the role of caregiver. Rather, her "body surges. She wants to wrap her arms around his frame, touch his knobbed and flaccid skin again" (159). Especially when outside the social constraints that bind her within city limits, she reads Josef differently from how she does when he is surrounded by social signs of his supposed inadequacy.

Van Herk demonstrates how Josef's context and companions define his late life. Alone with Arachne, Josef "is strangely wild; he calls her from her body despite the cane flung down in the stubble, his slack skin. They are thieves locked in the same cell, a man with too little and a woman with too much." However, contained by the broader social context, when he is under his daughter's care at her home, his virility suffers. Within Arachne's sight, with his disapproving daughter's reproach evident, "he shambles, bent and subdued under her iron love" (152). To Arachne's confidante, Thena, Josef is only an object of disgust: "Just remember, old men are big babies. They whine, they slobber, they're incontinent. It's a natural outcome of the way they live their lives. Bastards" (160). Even Arachne often views Josef within the framework set up by these other characters and circumstances: "There is something so powdery in his stance, so shaky that she cannot believe what they did in the field. He must have been powerful once; his frame juts through age. Now he seems immensely old, laborious and balanced attention evident in his shrunken buttocks, revealing lost strength and muscle" (158). But the sexual desire Arachne has for Josef overpowers this physical impression so that she feels compelled to try to free him from that ultimate symbol of elderly fragility, the nursing home. His escape, and her role in it, culminates in her escape from the landscape she has previously traversed. Whether it is a literal escape, a death, or a disappearance is never resolved, but the act of freeing Josef frees her from her already rebellious social roles.

The unlikely, overwhelming sexual desire Arachne has for Josef raises eyebrows both because female characters rarely achieve the position of subject (sexually or otherwise) but more frequently appear as objects of physical desire and also because this unlikely sexual object, a nonagenarian man whose daughter can no longer care for him, still exudes sensual strength. Goldman, in a brief mention of this love affair, reads it as beyond the confines of a realist plot: "*No Fixed Address* refuses to reduce Arachne's desire to travel to the confines of a realistic plot: the spider-like Arachne is never caught in her own web. Instead, she fearlessly crosses into unmapped territory. Moving beyond the conventional roles of daughter, wife, and mother, she remains sexually appetitive and adventurous—so much so, that she flaunts social convention that relegates the elderly to an asexual limbo, and has a passionate affair with Joseph [*sic*], a coppersmith who is almost ninety" (29). I suggest that Van Herk writes the romance between Arachne and Josef as though it *is* a realist refusal of social roles, and her revisionism

relies upon this laughing at the usual expectations of a realist plot. As Van Herk explains in an interview with Dorothy Jones, “I like turning reality on its head to show women who are actually in control of their lives and who are acting upon their fictional lives rather than being acted upon themselves” (7). She writes the possibilities of an empowering May-December romance to make that possible. Briefly, Arachne feels her youth and the possibility of her death through her encounter with Josef, asking herself, “What makes her feel his surrogate, his deputy? One genuflection over an unburied skull? One quick tumble in a field? The dead are dead. Arachne is alive.” However, Van Herk disallows that simple explanation of their connection by finishing the passage with the words, “And, for that matter, so is he” (160). Readers cannot simply read Josef as practically dead due to his age, the way his daughter does. Arachne explores her emotional connection to lovers in this particular sexual scene more than she does in later frequent occurrences, thinking, “She can lay herself in Thomas’ arms with complete faith, while her sympathy for Josef is more like recognition, an indication of what she might become, a reminder of the ragged child that Raki was” (160), but the overriding explanation remains a socially improbable lust.

Throughout *No Fixed Address*, self-reflexive italicized sections, each entitled “Notebook on a Missing Person,” toy with readers who seek impossibly unmitigated realism, offering only a search for answers, one that proves not to be the most effective entry into this innovative narrative. Ian MacLaren explains: “Probably most readers want to find out who the hell the italicized voice belongs to, not recognizing it as the realistic reader’s—for once the displaced voice—which sits outside the narrative; this voice tries to track down the picara who ventures outside society, the home of realism.” Arachne Manteia is a new figure on the narrative landscape, and readers searching to find a reference point for her will leave the novel with many questions. Still, Arachne’s quest depends upon this parallel search. As Van Herk tells Karin Beeler, “what I wanted to do was put the follower of the picaro, or picara in this case, into the text, so that the picaresque novel cannot exist without the one who searches or follows the journey as well, whether that be a combination of reader/researcher” (88). The revision of the picaro quest relies upon this layered structure. It does not matter whether someone like Arachne really could have a lover like Josef, actually could live as a traveling underwear saleswoman who does not wear underwear, or possibly could have sex without condoms and not

risk disease. It does matter that a novel *can* and does imagine these possibilities, and the reader of *No Fixed Address* has to follow Arachne in these adventures and think about his/her own role in the textual process of making this story possible.

Looking the Part: Experimenting with *The Widows*

In Suzette Mayr's *The Widows*, the role of *picara* is shared by a group of senescent women whose incongruous journey to achieve a heroic quest audaciously shifts the margins. Like Van Herk's labyrinthine journey, the map made by Mayr's forays into magic realism interrogates dominant representative strategies, troubles prevailing narrative patterns, and proposes a key role for narrative experimentation in the revision of age identity. This is not so simple as to claim that postmodernism questions dominant narratives, although that is part of the textual process at work in both of these novels. Rather, the ways in which both Van Herk and Mayr manipulate the realist novel and experiment with time and space make room for depicting parts of old age, other than physical suffering, sage advice-giving, and grandmotherly doting, which do not typically occupy central plots.

In *The Widows* Mayr openly and humorously challenges the expectations of aging and voyaging. In depicting three women aged seventy-five through eighty-five following the example of the sixty-three-year-old woman who was the first person to take Niagara Falls and survive, the novel conjoins various motivations elderly women may have for embarking on a quest. Hannelore Schmitt's inexplicable connection to the water pouring down the rocks that she saw the first time she came to Canada from Germany in 1971 represents a continued sense of hope well into late life. Hannelore's sister Clotilde's habitual choice to follow under protest exemplifies the at times forced interdependent communities that arise in the face of old age. However, the reasons why Frau Schnadelhuber, Clotilde's lover, embarks on the cross-Canada trek are perhaps the most poignant and revealing. Her excitement at the potential of committing the "Crime of the Century," and its significance for her future, transcends her depression at two potent symbols of an old age she cannot tolerate: having been both fired from her job and given a Lifeline pendant by her daughter.

As in *No Fixed Address*, characters who seem unlikely to engage in sexual plots appear decidedly sensual in *The Widows*. If one were to

believe reviewer Mary Soderstrom, “There’s a lot of sex in *The Widows* by Suzette Mayr, a comic novel about three old women: straight sex, lesbian sex, remembered sex, substitute sex—and symbolic sex in the form of a head-long, tumultuous trip over Niagara Falls in an egg-shaped vessel appropriately called the Niagara Ball” (25). It is interesting that reviews note this supposedly predominant sex since, though elderly female characters do engage in most of the forms of sex listed, Mayr’s first novel, *Moon Honey*, far exceeds *The Widows* in the number of sex scenes but invites no such mention in reviews. But because in *The Widows* the characters depicted as sexual—old women—do not match public perceptions of who is supposed to seek and revel in pleasures of the flesh, and particularly transgressive pleasures, the sex becomes the dominant metaphor through which the central characters’ far greater achievement, going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, is read.

I suggest other metaphorical and experiential readings of the “head-long tumultuous trip over Niagara Falls” taken by Mayr’s motley assemblage of old women. Mayr posits a late life rich with adventure and community that transcends contemporary calls for “successful aging” through physical modification and that does not trip up on the materiality of the aging body. Mayr’s revolutionary road-trip narrative proposes a late-life quest into self-realization and engagement with historical models that contributes to contemporary gerontological calls for new models and theories of aging without denying the various physical changes that often do accompany late life.

The Widows’ narrative structure presents readers with multiple layers of access to the story of women embarking on an improbable journey. For example, Mayr adds a layer to the representational framework that highlights the generic restrictions on female old age within a literary context when she introduces readers to the Niagara quest through the musical playing at the Royal Auditorium, Hannelore’s place of employment. Her imagined *Niagara! The Musical* embodies the revisionism expected of an ageist context, in that the staged version revises heroine Annie Edson Taylor’s age downward by at least thirty years. The young New York actress Sharon-Lee Silver, who plays Taylor, embodies a typical female sensuousness: “[She] knelt in simulated Niagara river water, dry ice swirling around her, her lips red and luxurious, the curls of her blonde wig piled on her head like hairy whipped cream” (69). Through Silver, Mayr sets up the story in a fairly typical age-sanitized frame, where signs of aging are kept out of sight in order

not to alarm an audience not quite ready to face the pervasive presence of late life.

Still within the realist, if parodic, section of the novel, Mayr disrupts this version when Silver and her understudy are both unable to perform. Mayr's description of the audiences' reaction to the sixty-year-old wardrobe mistress, much closer to Taylor's actual age, as replacement mocks the unrealistic expectations that govern the contemporary entertainment industry. As though there has been a physical disaster,

audiences run for the doors, past Hannelore who is working as an usher: Patrons scampered up and down the aisles. Waved their arms and clucked around the lobby in their expensive suits, their expensive ticket stubs in their hands.

My wife and I paid to see Sharon-Lee Silver, said one in a grey suit. He shook his stub in Hannelore's face, almost jammed the stub up Hannelore's nose. I did not pay eighty dollars to see an understudy who doesn't even look the *part*, he shouted. (123)

Mayr has subtly pointed out to readers that the wardrobe-mistress-turned-actress in fact looks more the part of the "real life" Taylor than does Sharon-Lee Silver. The irate audience member's argument humorously reinforces the futility of arguing for a realist enjoyment of late life. That is, he understands the revisionist version of the Niagara event far better than he could ever understand the quest of the original Taylor. The failure of realism on stage foregrounds Mayr's own detours in magic realism that allow the quest for late-life notoriety to take shape.

Though reviewers would make much of it, the fact that Hannelore takes advantage of her erstwhile lover, Hamish, in order to gain access to the vehicle that will transport them down the waterfall has less to do with her sexual fulfillment and more to do with her refusal to submit to the gendered exigencies of her youth. Hamish is a necessary detour for her, but she happily leaves him behind to embark on her quest with her sister and her sister's lover. The journey east along the TransCanada Highway stands in direct contrast to traditional progress stories that always depict a journey west ("go west, young man"). Instead of extending a frontier of exploitation (of land and peoples) through youthful exuberance, these women retrace their steps in order to find a point of reentry into narrative freedom.

The trip over the falls is an inspired encapsulation of aging jour-

neys. The women choose an extremely difficult path and succeed by teaming up, gleaning local resources, and hoping for the best. Their collaborative efforts could serve as a model for creative efforts to develop cooperative housing models that exceed the bounds of current available nursing homes. As they tumble to the bottom, they experience physical indignity, an extremely angry ghost, and an unexpected pause. While the aging process is not entirely physical, indignities of the body do usually increase, as do thoughts of mortality that bring up personal equivalents of ghosts in the form of thoughts about those who have gone before. Pauses permeate late-life experience and likely become more expected as time continues. As a final example of the tumble as symbolic of any attempts to refuse typical attempts to hide aging, the voyage is recklessly public and decidedly defiant.

The women break the local law by going over the falls and the unwritten law by having 240-odd years of experience among them. In order to convey the extreme rebellion and resistance that this tumble encompasses, Mayr takes the extraordinary step of splitting the text into parallel columns that signify simultaneity: the disruption to the visual experience of novel reading, mimicking the shape of the falls, is matched by the disruption to readerly complacency. Habitual left-to-right reading patterns cannot make sense of the page, and so the reader has to choose an entry point and attempt to control the narrative strands, but on the first read, the reader has no reference point for the significance of choosing one order over another.

The victorious journey earns the trio instant renown, though the loss of their dental plates leaves them in a somewhat disadvantaged position when speaking to reporters. Unlike Annie Taylor, who claimed to be only forty-two, these women tell the truth about their age or exaggerate it:

I am seventy-five years old, says Hannelore. My name is Mrs. Heinrich Schmitt, and I need to phone my son and daughter-in-law. Hannelore's hair in straggles, her hands shaking, mouth bleeding.

I am eighty-five, says Clotilde. She pulls the blanket tightly around her and her gums begin to mutter.

I will be one hundred and twenty-four next September, sings Frau Schnadelhuber and she claps her hands in the air and begins to dance. I smoke a pack a day and look at me! (241)

Mayr's engagement with magic realism allows fantastical detours.

Elderly characters are allowed adventures that most younger people can only imagine, such as catapulting over waterfalls. The characterization of older tourists as daredevils speaks to a world of possibility not so much for people as for fiction. It is unusual for anyone of any age to attempt the falls. But it is typical for fiction to inject all number of impossible possibilities into the human imagination. If *Niagara! The Musical* can change Annie Edson Taylor's age to twenty-nine, why shouldn't *The Widows* change it to ninety?

Conclusion

Current notions of "successful aging"—especially those encapsulated in the anti-aging movement—can be damaging through their normative conception of success. Retirement magazines featuring energetic silver-haired models on the tennis court hold out hope for readers that the leisure that comes with retirement will be active and exciting, but they do not offer much to those retired people who either cannot or do not want to maintain the pace of working life. Further, the images are based very much on a capitalist sense of individual achievement as key to success. As Stephen Katz explains, "in equating the virtues of positive aging with successful aging, and anti-ageism with timeless anti-aging, both professional and commercial fields share common ground in their struggle to represent the new aging. At the same time, positive agendas based on activity and mobility can downplay traditionally crucial values such as wisdom and disengagement by translating the latter into 'problems' of inactivity and dependency" (29). Social gerontologists have tapped into the potentially damaging messages of this successful aging rhetoric, suggesting that the aging process itself should be a model for a successful earlier life rather than the reverse and that this can be achieved if collective action becomes a goal. Renowned social gerontologist Thomas R. Cole, writing with David G. Stevenson, explains the problems with the shallow rhetoric and thinking associated with the successful aging movement by linking those problems to misunderstandings of the American Social Security process, saying that "successful aging in this context means the combination of increased freedom in retirement with undiminished physical and cognitive functioning. It should not be surprising that many of us fail to meet this standard. Indeed, this myth of independence is perpetuated by the misguided belief that individuals should be able to fend for themselves, a

belief reinforced by the popular misconception that Social Security is a contract in which the beneficiary and the contributor are perceived to be one" (74). Understanding Social Security as a social (rather than a user-pay) system could lead to a better understanding of the benefits of including older people in the social imagination.

In her research based on interviews with long-living women, Carolyn M. Morell finds that the women "refuse to be the repository of others' fears and denials, or to see themselves through the ageist lens that others do. Women may actively protest, like Helen, or disempower others' perceptions through thinking practices. Carol told me that 'I don't think about other people thinking about me ever. It's my thinking about other people that matters. What I think about others is very crucial to my life, but what other people think about me doesn't bother me in the least.' Helen also said at one point: 'If you think I'm old, that's *your* problem!'" (74). This shift to an individual perspective is not the individualistic "I'm not old but you might be" of dominant "successful aging" discourses. Rather, it is a challenging perspective on aging that comes from a transformative self-discovery dependent in part on a phenomenological experience of late life.

No Fixed Address and *The Widows* defy normative space that would confine older characters by depicting an openly vibrant alternative mobility, at times dependent, at times independent. They defy cultural understandings of old age as a time of stasis and confinement. Together these novels contribute to gerontology in developing new ways of thinking about old age by manipulating the tricks and devices of fiction. Each posits aging mobility as artistically exciting at the very least, and as infinitely possible at the very most. The works co-opt the troubling sense of exile in old age and turn it into an escape not from old age but from countless unnecessarily debilitating constructions and interpretations of old age. For example, the characters in *The Widows* convey precisely the shift from self-consciousness to self-empowerment that Morell's interview subjects lay out.

The cultural depiction of elderly mobility participates in the same process that results—or more often does not result—in concrete adaptations, such as curb cuts, that create the conditions of mobility or immobility. Popular works that depict elderly characters as appropriately contained can negatively affect the social construction of aging. Literature and film have interrelated but distinct roles to play in challenging the social construction of aging as static and decrepit. As Van Herk tells Dorothy Jones, "Fiction ought to be suggestive. It ought to

suggest to us alternatives" ("Interview" 13). Contemporary depictions of elderly characters on the road again do more than expand literary and film road genres; they reconfigure expectations of old age in a way that stands to make elderly mobility important enough to matter socially.

Note

1. See my *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives* for an elaboration of this point.

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CHAPTER 9



So Much Depends Upon a Ya-Ya Scrapbook

Trauma, Figured and Reconfigured

SANDRA SINGER

Angels of the Southern Crescent, fluff my pillows, please. Let moonlight bathe me in my slumber. I'm a second-generation Ya-Ya on a long, long trip.

—*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*

Rebecca Wells's novel *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996), a sequel to *Little Altars Everywhere* (1992), generated tremendous interest when it was first published, leading to a French translation, *Les divins secrets des petites Ya-Ya* (1998); *Ya-Yas in Bloom* (2005); and a film version. The Warner Brothers film *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) came out with a star-studded cast, including Ellen Burstyn, Ashley Judd, Sandra Bullock, James Garner, and Maggie Smith, lending cultural capital to the film production. The name of one of the film's production companies, All Girl Productions, would imply that the film is intended for a particular audience. Angus Macfadyen, playing the Irish fiancé role, confirmed the market niche for the text—primarily women readers and viewers—and fulfilled his description as a looker: "He's Liam Neeson crossed with a young Hank Fonda, who's spent a few sessions on the couch" (*Divine Secrets* 169). However, well before the film *Divine Secrets* came out, the novel and its predecessor had already spawned a social network: local meetings of older women (Ya-Yas) and younger ones (petite Ya-Yas), to borrow the novel's vernacular; a regular online column by the author; and chat rooms and gatherings for fans. Online Ya-Ya chat rooms and Q&A with the author echoed the novels' and film's focus on friendships among women that endure over fifty years.

While the emphasis on women's friendship in popular response is consistent throughout the novels and the film, a shift in focus happened between *Divine Secrets* as novel and film. The novel explores the experience of the early-middle-aged protagonist, actress and playwright Siddalee Walker, as she reads the scrapbook kept for half a century by the Ya-Ya Sisters (a group of four women, friends from childhood, that includes Sidda's mother). For Sidda, reading the scrapbook alone in a remote cottage becomes the means whereby she learns to understand the correspondence between her mother's joys and failures and her own. Through Sidda's experience, the novel, therefore, explores the consequences for the petite Ya-Yas of having been raised under the wing of the Sisterhood. In contrast, the film foregrounds and celebrates the Ya-Yas themselves. Exclusive sisterhood among women, shaped by Native American spirituality, southern Catholicism, and voodoo and African American folk rituals, binds the Ya-Yas together in the film and online (the principal Web site for online communication is <http://www.ya-ya.com/>).

In their concentration on how the younger women were shaped by their upbringing, the three English novels, *Little Altars Everywhere*, *Divine Secrets*, and *Ya-Yas in Bloom*, actualize powerful social issues—mother-daughter relationships, absent fathers, alcoholism, and child abuse. In particular, the highly performative fiction, drawing especially on dialogue, internal monologue, and dramatic scenes, highlights the theme of trauma.¹ Through her reading of the scrapbook, Sidda confronts again her painful abuse as a child that continues to traumatize her adult life, preventing her marriage, and putting her theater career on hold.²

The novel begins with Sidda's unassimilated feelings about her childhood abuse unexpectedly surfacing when Sidda inadvertently blurts out to a *New York Times* interviewer that her mother strapped her as a child, a confession that leads to a rift between Siddalee and her mother, Vivi Abbott Walker. Searching for explanation, clarification, and the restoration of the relationship that her mother has broken off, Sidda asks to read the Ya-Ya scrapbook, a collection of personal memorabilia from her mother's and her mother's friends' lives. As Sidda works her way through the scrapbook, mostly in isolation in a cabin on Lake Quinalt in Washington State, the older women's stories are revealed to her. Understanding more fully the context in which she was reared, Sidda is freed to investigate her own impasses and move beyond them in her playwriting and marriage plans. Thus the theme

of this volume (the spiritual adventures of midlife and older women) is enacted here in an early-midlife woman spiraling back and advancing on in her quest for self-understanding and spiritual insight.

This chapter will examine (1) the different ways in which *Divine Secrets* portrays Sidda's abusive childhood; (2) Sidda's adult journey back into childhood memories as a process of spiritual healing—the acquisition of detachment from a past that tainted her sense of self and the recovery of her own inner rhythms and meanings—in order to recover independence understood as day-to-day, full functioning in the world; (3) the process by which readers undergo their own spiritual and therapeutic journeys while discussing the novels and the film in Internet sources; (4) a spiritualized, cathartic return to origins in *Little Altars Everywhere*; and (5) the reconciliation of Sidda and her mother, and the hope this provides for the future.

Divine Secrets

The narrative of *Divine Secrets* works through flashbacks that are triggered by Sidda's encountering objects in the scrapbook such as invitations, ticket stubs, a key, and photographs, items that draw out memories from Sidda—often painful ones. For example, in the scrapbook, Sidda finds a handwritten thank-you note to Vivi from Willetta Lloyd, the Walkers' housemaid, dated December 1, 1957, "for the cashmere coat you done give me" (257). The note leads Sidda to speculate about "this woman [Willetta] who had been a mother to her[, who] . . . had given Sidda an acceptance and affection that were miraculous" (258). Vivi had given the coat to Willetta in order to appease her own guilt for running away to the Gulf Coast and leaving her children in the African American woman's hands without explanation. The memory had previously occurred to Sidda as a nightmare recollection: "Once, years ago, Sidda had dreamed of seeing her mother standing in a doorway. In the dream, when Vivi unbuttoned the coat, she had been naked underneath, with gashes all over her body, as though she had fallen on a bed of knives" (259). The "gashes all over her body" convey the impact of Vivi's destructive marriage, the tension eventually leading to Vivi and her partner Shep sleeping in separate bedrooms. As she begins to reexperience childhood emotions, Sidda slowly reassembles and reconstitutes past memories, including dreams, which provide a glimpse of what was previously only partially known to her, in this case the extent of her mother's anguish, pain, and depression.

The flashbacks bring attention to a special feature of Wells's novel: its disjointed time sequence. Sidda's response while reading the scrapbook is typical of traumatic memory, which is unruly, jumping from one time frame to another, reasserting the traumatic memory from the past into the present. Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, constitutes "a break in the mind's experience of time" (61). Elaborating on this idea, Suzette Henke postulates that "traumatic memories constitute a kind of prenarrative that does not progress or develop in time" (xvii). Drawing on Caruth's insights into the unruly and chaotic characteristic style of trauma narratives, Henke emphasizes the manner in which this writing gives words to what had before been only abstracted, privately held impressions. According to Caruth, the traumatic event repeats itself in the form of neurosis that is "not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). Using flashbacks triggered by clues attached to the scrapbook, Wells's fiction both fleshes out Sidda's and her mother's history and suggests the workings of traumatic memories.³ Before the *New York Times* interview, Sidda had built up a secure life in the North, developing marriage plans to Connor and making her own life. However, following the interview, Sidda is caught in a nightmarish repetition of her mother's behavior, incapable of acting other than she imagined her mother did. Sidda identifies her individual possibilities so closely with her mother's failure to achieve self-fulfillment that, when the story of Vivi's abusive child-rearing is published, Sidda is transported psychologically and emotionally back to the impasses of her childhood. Reenacting her mother's loss of her lover Jack who was killed in World War II, Sidda leaves Connor after imagining that she will follow her mother's example and fail as mother and spouse.

At the remote Washington cabin where she goes after leaving New York, Sidda pores over the scrapbook, uncovering the past of both her mother and her mother's friends, a past that had been only vaguely contemplated by their daughters in the context of their limited childhood understandings. In the course of her intensive study, a hard kernel of the past is turned up, one that Sidda cannot manage to process on her own. Fortunately, the company of the Ya-Yas arrives (Necie, Caro, and Teensy, but not Sidda's mother, Vivi) after it becomes clear in conversation with Caro, who is now old, suffering from emphysema, and struggling to breathe, that Sidda was never given any explanation for her mother's long disappearance after she beat Sidda severely. This particular beating, the worst recorded in the fiction, operates as a limit-event. Other stances of abuse approach or recede from this

extreme instance. Sidda is severely traumatized when her mother lines up and belts naked Sidda and her naked siblings (from the child's eyes, as punishment for wickedness) and then suddenly disappears with no explanation. The child had conjectured—"She went away because of me, didn't she, Caro?" (173). In Laingian psychoanalytic terms, Sidda bears the guilt for her mother's furious disapproval.

Sidda is not able to come to terms with her past trauma and assimilate it in her present understanding of herself until she reads her past differently in the scrapbook. In doing this she helps bridge what Cathy Caruth, in her study of traumatic repetition, calls the chasm between past trauma and future possibilities. Until Sidda can reconfigure her mother's beating her and then disappearing, she cannot but react to memories that invade her present. The traumatic memory has not been narrativized but instead is fixed in the past. In her introduction to *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke speaks about the power of telling one's story to bring unintegrated traumatic memories into one's consciousness where they can be dealt with. In Henke's words, "*Narrative recovery . . . pivots on a double entendre meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject*" (xxii, emphasis in original). Thus narrative has the power to free up the past—when the individual is ready to receive it. In retelling her story, Sidda incorporates material from the past (found in the scrapbook), which as an adult she now has the capacity to interpret, into a new sense of self. Decoding the Ya-Ya scrapbook with support from Caro, Teensy, and Necie represents the summation of Sidda's training as a reader.

Spiritual Awakening

Importantly, many of the scrapbook's contents are objects, which have the effect of returning Sidda and the reader to a previous time. For example, Sidda reexperiences childhood fear and her mother's response after she finds a key, which, as she explains to Connor, "used to hang from a key chain that had a blue plastic elephant attached" (317). Suddenly invaded by memories of the past, Sidda narrates a fantastic elephant ride arranged for her by her mother after the real ride on the mall tarmac had closed. Vivi began with a prayer:

"Siddalee," Mama said, "close your eyes, just for a minute." Then,

in her most magical high-priestess-European-queen-gypsy-fortune-teller voice, Mama began to speak.

“Lawanda [the elephant], oh Magnificent One, spirit Siddalee and Vivi Walker away from this hot blacktop parking lot! Return us to the untamed green jungle from whence we came!

“Are you ready?” Mama asked. “Are you willing?”

“Yes, Mama! I’m ready. I’m willing!”

“Then open your eyes! Open your eyes and witness Vivi and Sidda of the High and Mighty Tribe of Ya-Yas as they commence their great escape on the back of Royal Lawanda![]” (325)

On the way home after the elephant ride with her mother, Sidda found that “the world outside our car seemed charged with mystery, all new and unknown” (326). Within “the generosity of Connor’s listening” (317), Sidda has contemplated the key and the magic moment it conjured up and found her way to accept the wisdom that her mother had proffered in that moment: “*It’s life, Sidda. You just climb on the beast and ride*” (326, emphasis in original). Thus Sidda is able to begin the process of reclaiming her past and endowing it with her own meanings.

Though it had been possible while she lived up north for Sidda to write beyond the limits of her family’s traumatic life experience, living a new role proves much more difficult after the *Times* interview rekindles the emotions and experiences of the past. Even to *consider* change requires Sidda’s disengagement from the childhood web of intense feelings and thoughts such as those instigated by finding the key. While the process centers on Sidda’s reading the scrapbook alone in the cottage, by itself the scrapbook is not enough. Human mediation is also needed, and, at a crucial point, the Ya-Yas (not including Sidda’s mother, yet) recognize the need to intervene personally. They arrive at the cottage as witnesses to the scene of a long-ago crime. While the scrapbook opens up the past, the lifetime friends flesh out that past for Sidda.⁴ Vivi perceives the necessary healing for which Sidda yearns and accepts her own temporary ostracism from the group and, in the process, begins to come to terms with her failings as a mother and her struggles within her marriage as she waits to be reinstalled within the circle of the tribal Ya-Ya elders. Vivi responds to Sidda’s need for access to her mother’s past by sending the scrapbook. As Vivi explains to Teensy: “I have sent my oldest daughter—The Grand Inquisitor—Our ‘Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood.’ But there is so much I didn’t give her, cannot give her. Cannot give myself” (248). Allowing the Ya-Ya Sisters to act as a

conduit, Vivi acquiesces to their wish to explain Vivi's disappearance to her daughter.

The most crucial contribution of the elders (minus Vivi) centers on the time after the children had been so severely beaten: Vivi Walker "checked into a psychiatric clinic for three months. No one ever knew, except us," Caro informs Sidda. Caro continues by expressing her regret that social convention prevented the Ya-Ya Sisters from explaining Vivi's disappearance to her traumatized children: "What I regret the most is that none of us ever talked with you, Sidda—or Little Shep, Lulu, or Baylor. We hid behind some archaic belief that you do not interfere with another person's children" (305). Unlike her interaction with the scrapbook and her mother, Sidda can question her mother's friends about her mother's mental breakdown, and they clarify her interpretation in an ongoing dialogue that uses the scrapbook as facilitator. Specifically about Sidda's mother's disappearance, Caro states: "Here's what I want you to know: *not one bit of this is your fault*. Something just cracked in Vivi" (305, emphasis in original).

This is only one example of how the power of social norms prevents the Ya-Yas from interfering with the children and trivializes or distorts the symbolic content of life histories. Thus *Divine Secrets* investigates numerous youthful misadventures, sometimes leading to trouble, undertaken by the Ya-Yas that at the beginning of the narrative remain unanalyzed within Sidda's unconscious. The novel's structure mimics Sidda's consciousness, being nudged along by the scrapbook, which brings to mind unconscious experience. The story is fragmentary, revealed through bits and pieces of information given in different time frames and in different narrative forms. For example, we have the time frame of the narrative's present in 1993 as Sidda thinks over an embarrassing incident in the past in which the Ya-Ya Sisters were put in jail for the night on account of bathing in the town's water supply. Her recollection, given in the third person, draws on scrapbook entries of two newspaper clippings from 1942. These are followed by an omniscient account of the jail incident: "The night of August 3, 1942, not five hours after Jack Whitman announced he was joining the Army Air Corps, an embarrassed policeman locked Vivi Abbott and the Ya-Yas into a cell in the Thornton jail" (149). These omniscient narrative interludes, drawn from different time periods, provide material to the reader that is not immediately available to Sidda, thereby inviting the reader to construct the symbolic meaning of events and Sidda's experience of them. Thus Vivi's past suffering, including physical entrapment

in jail, enters the current story through Sidda's and the readers' construction and interpretation of the stories of the Ya-Yas' past.

Only thus through omniscient interludes and reconstruction do we gradually uncover the part that the Ya-Yas have played and continue to play in Sidda's life. Each of the Ya-Ya Sisters has a distinct role in their grouping, as may be seen when, in 1993, "they took the same positions they had been taking in Teensy's convertibles since 1941: Teensy behind the wheel; Vivi, shotgun; Necie just behind the driver; and Caro in the backseat behind Vivi" (12). Further, Necie toasts their combined "sense of history" together, which Caro sees revealed in "Ya-Ya-rabilia." It is Caro who insists that Vivi make the scrapbook available to her daughter, who has asked to see it: "'Life is short, Pal,' Caro said. 'Send the scrapbook.'" The Ya-Yas clink their glasses in agreement when they have convinced Vivi to send the scrapbook: "Each of them in turn met each others' eyes. . . . This is a cardinal Ya-Ya rule: you *must* meet each person's eyes while clinking glasses in a toast" (16, emphasis in original). An important aspect beyond having known each other in depth over a long time is this trust and acceptance of one another. Caro, for example, "didn't" at the time and subsequently "won't" judge Vivi for her parenting failures (305). However, Teensy does step in to clarify for Sidda her mother's disappearance when Sidda was a child, though with Vivi's blessing: "Okay, it's in your [Teensy's] hands. Do whatever you think is right," Vivi tells her (256). Thus the Ya-Yas' decision to send Sidda the scrapbook is done with Vivi's consent, as is their subsequent visit to Sidda without Vivi.

Within *Divine Secrets* we go back to the earliest days of the Ya-Ya Sisters when they originally give themselves the name "the Louisiana Ya-Yas." Folk rituals drawn on (not from) Native American initiation ceremonies from popular culture characterize the initiation ceremony when the pubescent Ya-Yas form themselves into a group and begin to constitute the ritual practices of the Ya-Ya Sisters. The chapter subsection "The Secret History of the Louisiana Ya-Yas" even gives the teen-aged girls names that suggest Native American culture: Vivi is Queen Dancing Creek; Caro is Duchess Soaring Hawk; Necie is Countess Singing Cloud; and Teensy is Princess Naked-as-a-Jaybird (70–72). The self-named group is tribal in construction. Although married eventually, the women are not only tied emotionally to their husbands or to images of respectability. Their allegiance is also to one another. In contrast, it is powerful husbands and social norms—especially those implied by marriage and then motherhood—that destroy Genevieve,

Jack's mother, after her son is killed in war and that torment Vivi. Genevieve, the mother of Teensy and Jack, wildly spirited, her language spiced with Cajun French, is mismatched to her very rich, conservative husband, who is president of Garnet Savings and Loan. When Jack is killed, Genevieve, a demonstratively loving mother, unable to accept the fact of her son's death, is heartbroken by the loss and does not recover psychologically. She cannot forgive her husband's desire that Jack should join the war effort, reading her husband's attitude as male pride that put their son at risk.

If their sisterhood is portrayed as their strongest support, Catholicism is portrayed as a spiritual dead end, that is, a form of social constraint associated with patriarchal norms. It enters the fiction principally through Mary Katherine Bowman Abbott, who is called Buggy by her grandchildren. Buggy Abbott, as she is referred to throughout the novels, is Vivi's pious, sexually repressed, jealous, vindictive mother. Part of the psychic turmoil for Sidda in the fiction stems from the ominous insight that she cannot be free from this guilt-ridden past (reminiscent of the biblical reenactment of original sin). When Vivi in desperation confesses to a priest of her desire to injure her children and leave her spouse and family, the priest, while absolving her sin, sends her home where she proceeds to beat her four children. The Church conspires with societal values to hold women like Vivi and Genevieve in unhappy situations. Moreover, the partners in Vivi and Genevieve's marriages represent patriarchal values—mirrored in the gospel and power structures of the Catholic Church—that these wives are incapable of challenging effectively.

Nonetheless, the secular Catholicism that the Ya-Yas represent is a lively challenge to Buggy Abbott's guilt-encompassing religious practice that acts like a stranglehold, preventing her daughter Vivi from finding joy with Jack. In the antebellum South of the Ya-Yas' generation, marriage constituted women's only social or employment option; within that sphere, Vivi could make a self-fulfilling or self-limiting match, but the social expectation was marriage. The story may falter over this issue for some readers who are not comfortable with Vivi's dependence on Jack for satisfaction. However, the second generation of women, the petite Ya-Yas, has a new source of satisfaction and comfort. It is not a male lover but the mother-daughter bond that is the source for Sidda's playwriting. As she says in the *New York Times* interview that precipitates the impasse between herself and her mother, her difficult childhood is to be embraced (not rejected). After the *Times* interview

is released, Sidda asks Vivi on the telephone if she “read the part where I *credited* you for my creativity? Where I said, ‘My creativity comes in a direct flow from my mother, like the Tabasco she used to spice up our baby bottles’” (2, emphasis in original). The plot is centered precisely on this reconfiguring of the past by Sidda within the context of her current struggle over the fulfillment of work and marriage plans. Working out psychopathology interactively in the family is an important development of R. D. Laing’s psychoanalytic theory: through the family’s admission of a cross-generational destructive pattern, as signaled by Vivi sending her daughter the scrapbook, Sidda can potentially work through it. Reenacting the pattern of familial behavior as configured in her own troubled engagement, Sidda learns to revalue and appreciate her spiritual journey as a thread connecting female generations.

Vivi’s positive influence on Sidda the playwright and her other children is apparent in the dramatic flair they exhibit. The four Abbott Walker children are raised in theatrically charged spaces. They are aware of their own capacity to create, even from a young age. “This is more fun than I thought it would be!” says young Shep, Sidda’s brother, when he has prompted his grandmother’s craziness by throwing dolls into the kitchen wastebasket (*Little Altars* 119). Buggy contends that her dog sees the dolls as her puppies. In the subsequent chapter Sidda creates havoc at a pious friend’s house by taking an extra slice of bread that is not accounted for. She reflects on the disorder her sly act has achieved: “I’m so thrilled with what I’ve put into motion that I can hardly sit still. I don’t know how I can ever confess this! It feels great, like something I was born to do” (135). This performative characteristic the children inherit from their mother. Recognizing her inescapable participation as a child in roles that were predetermined by her parents and her role as firstborn helps Sidda determine what is valuable to take from her past.⁵

Sidda’s healing is a process of coming to terms with her past. Here life is explored as a spiritual journey—through the generations—in all its intensity, pain, and sudden illumination. With a greater understanding of her family story, and in particular family trauma, Sidda is better able to discover new strengths and move forward with her life.

The Importance of Chat Rooms

The Ya-Ya movement outside the novel can be viewed as performing

a bonding function for women readers that is similar to the necessary reconnections that are formed in the course of the novels between mother and daughter, Ya-Ya and petite Ya-Ya. Wells's novels show this primary relationship between women as necessary for sustaining health and mental well-being. Through the documentation of their shared history and their discussion of it, the female figures in the novel as a group act out their past, bringing it into the present. Chat room and online readers discuss and unravel the significance of the scrapbook disclosures even as Sidda and the Ya-Ya Sisters perform this function in the novel. Importantly, for readers of Wells's fiction, making sense of the scrapbook is itself a shared experience.

The Ya-Ya chat rooms allow for letter-writing intimacy among readers as they share interpretations of the novel. What further intimacy occurs in this Internet setting? Online visitors compose identities that can be compared to those of "the Louisiana Ya-Yas." The element of fantasy experienced by the Ya-Ya chat room visitors is explored in Mark Poster's book *What's the Matter with the Internet?* In particular, he elaborates on the aspect of "simultaneity," which "completely erases spatial factors and implodes time. The vectors of space and time are drastically reconfigured in the new technologies. They allow and even promote . . . forms of eroticism that threaten to destroy basic social institutions" (26). Furthermore, the fantasy of the Ya-Ya or petite Ya-Ya chat is not carried forward from Internet dialogue in predictable ways. This interaction is unlike the film and novel plot of *Divine Secrets*, which is resolved by the eventual face-to-face meeting between Vivi and Sidda (who has been informed about events in her childhood through the scrapbook) and by visits to the cabin by the Ya-Yas and Connor. But the virtual interaction has its own kind of power. In her "Welcome" comments, Wells recognizes the specificity of the online Ya-Ya groups. She addresses "one of the dedications of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*: 'To the Ya-Ya Sisterhood in all its incarnations.' One of those incarnations is a Cyber-Sisterhood . . . , and I feel blessed to have been called into such community" ("Ya-Ya Notes"). Potentially, "meeting" new people on the Web (and, in some cases, at Ya-Ya gatherings) also facilitates the process of narrative recovery of past experience and its reintegration by the individual, but in an imaginary environment without risk, in a manner similar to viewing the *Divine Secrets* film or reading Wells's books.

Poster seeks to "specify the parameters of these 'virtual' configurations" (18) that include chat rooms, or Q&A with the author. These

seem to share with popular culture, which includes Wells's best-selling fiction, what John Fiske calls an emphasis on "process" rather than on "products": "Popular culture . . . is better recognized by what it *does* than by what it *is*" (323, emphasis in original). Wells explains, in her "Valentine's Day, 2003" column addressed "Dear Sisters-in-Heart," the way in which her fiction has come to life in Ya-Ya meetings initiated through chat rooms: "As I write to you this month, I'm filled with excitement at all the Ya-Ya gatherings I read about on the porch! Oh, how I love the idea of all of you getting together. Meeting one another, sharing secrets, finding soul sisters, laughing, getting rowdy, getting quiet, quaffing, dining, howling, dancing, boogeying, chanting, being your luminous selves." Through the Internet the process of interpreting women's lives that is initiated within *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets* continues by making use of stories from the chat room visitors' lives.

In addition to the interactive Web site, part of the structuring of community for readers not from Louisiana or nearby is the audiotape of *Divine Secrets* and *Little Altars Everywhere*, read by Rebecca Wells. Additionally, she provides an epigraph to *Little Altars Everywhere* from Katherine Mansfield's *Journal*: "Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change. So suffering must become love. That is the mystery." Wells articulates in her "Note to the Reader" what this quotation means in terms of her sense of the relationship between reader and writer through text. Fleshing out words, she describes "the mystery" whereby "suffering [may] . . . become love." In her words, "Hidden blessings inside suffering. This is ultimately what *Little Altars Everywhere* is about. . . . Breaks create openings that were not there before, and in that space grow the seeds for new creation. So that at the dark center of suffering that suffuses *Little Altars Everywhere* lies both the luminance of blessing, as well as the seeds for my second book, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*" (*Little Altars* xviii).

Beginnings: *Little Altars Everywhere*

Divine Secrets is more celebrated than *Little Altars Everywhere*. But the success of *Divine Secrets* and the intensity of Sidda's struggle with her mother in that book led readers such as myself to search out the previous novel, which is more clearly focused on the characters' suffering. Divided into sections that represent particular figures in the story,

there is significant accounting for Vivi's partner, Shep, and her children other than Sidda, figures who appear with little introduction in the subsequent *Divine Secrets*. *Little Altars Everywhere* describes the cycle of child abuse across generations between 1961 and 1991 from various subjective viewpoints. The perspectives of Vivi's partner, Shep, and Sidda's three siblings, present in *Little Altars Everywhere*, are absent from *Divine Secrets*, which focuses on Sidda, while the film focuses on the Ya-Yas. Without *Little Altars Everywhere*, one could imagine that Wells neglected to develop the other characters—Big Shep, Baylor, Lulu, Little Shep, Willetta, and her spouse, Chaney; however, it is fair to say that she had elsewhere already considered their positions in the story and the defining aspects of their past.

Sustained verbal, physical, and sexual abuse is revealed from various points of view in *Little Altars Everywhere*. Details of the children's sexual trauma will be considered later; first, it is important to recognize the pathological nature of the abuse that is confirmed by Chaney and Willetta and the Abbott Walker children. Vivi refers obliquely to her madness in *Divine Secrets* only as "when I dropped my basket" (255). Two Canadian collections of writing by women titled *Dropped Threads*, collected by Carol Shields and her coauthors, use the metaphor of dropping to highlight restrictive information that young women are told, what is concealed from them, and what women must discover. In order to achieve full function in society, Sidda has to learn similarly what occurred when her mother "dropped [her] . . . basket," or went mad. In her letter to Necie dated July 23, 1963, Vivi admits: "I cannot talk about what happened. My life was a basket and I dropped it" (*Divine Secrets* 297). The recovery of "dropped" items is essential to Sidda's comprehension of her relationship with her abusive mother and to her picking up and continuing her own inner growth.

Incidents such as Vivi's disappearance are only partially understood by Sidda as a young girl. Clarification seems to have been deliberately withheld from her. Sidda's frustrated child's viewpoint is shown, for example, in the chapter titled "Wilderness Training: Siddalee, 1963," from *Little Altars Everywhere*, when Sidda's girlhood voice introduces the Ya-Yas to the reader and concludes with the following comment about her being puzzled: "Also, the Ya-Yas were briefly arrested for something they did [bathing in the town water supply] when they were in high school, but Mama won't tell me what it was because she says I'm too young to comprehend" (*Little Altars* 5). Sidda needs to follow her urges and hunches to satisfaction if she is to develop beyond

a child's perspective or to discover through the "Breaks" in the text what Wells identifies as "the seeds for new creation." For example, Sidda's childhood observation that Aunt Jezie, her mother's sister, and Charlene Parks, Sidda's dance teacher, are unusually direct and open with each other (30–31) develops more fully when she later finds them in a lesbian embrace in bed (39). This follow-up on an early observation is a model that Sidda will need to use as an adult if she wants to uncover the deferred meanings that seem to have been purposely concealed in her family.

Social and familial stability seems to require that psychological or intellectual matters are not examined in Sidda's family. Her father, though absent much of the time drinking at the duck hunting camp, represents the basic values that underpin the property-type relations of white landowners. At the base of the family is "Daddy," who, if he "drives up [into the summer camp at Spring Creek where the Ya-Yas vacation together with their children] in his pickup, you know he'd yell at us, white women dancing like that," released to the music of Little Richard (*Little Altars* xxiv–xxv). Functioning in this family as patriarchal authority, Shep Walker censors the spirited pleasure of the women and limits the capacity of Sidda and her siblings, survivors of child abuse, to question his authority effectively.

Each child in the family has a characteristic mode of response to the "devil dance" between Shep and Vivi (*Divine Secrets* 167). Schizoid attitudes and behavior are evident in all the children. Sidda notes: "I don't cry because I can't breathe. Lulu starts eating her hair, like she does whenever she gets upset. Little Shep and Baylor are mute, and Baylor is shaking" (*Little Altars* 146).

Little Altars Everywhere identifies Sidda's bias toward language as a means to escape repressed emotions and develop understanding and psychological well-being. When she runs away from her maddened mother, Sidda finds refuge in a perilous hideaway in the cupboard of a visiting library service van parked, and subsequently locked, in the sweltering Louisiana heat. "That bookmobile is hot as hell, it's a 475-degree gas oven" (96). Her occupation of the cramped, suffocating quarters represents her current and future existence as a "word-dweller." I borrow this notion from J. J. Steinfeld's short story "Would You Hide Me?" In the Steinfeld fiction, a fifty-four-year-old comparative literature professor describes her existence: "I . . . have spent a lifetime dwelling in words" (15). Sidda's unusual vocabulary for a small child and developed language skills were noted by her mother

(*Little Altars* 81, 85): “The nuns tested the fifth graders and said Sidda has the reading skills of a high-school junior. Well, I could’ve told them that. The child used the word ‘impeccable’ before she even started first grade” (81).

Sidda’s language skill is apparent when she borrows the word “impeccable,” which in her mother’s vocabulary signifies purity. Sidda will learn to use this word (along with other family experiences) for her own purposes. However, Sidda cannot remain in the book van of words while she waits for her mother to rescue her. Eventually, she will turn inherited words into what her mother sees as hurtful performative theater and living.

At first Sidda’s performances are purely for herself as she attempts to find solace in art. Preparing the piano piece she would perform, called “The Elf and the Fairy,” is “the calmest part of my day. . . . I take my quiet wherever I can find it” (*Little Altars* 141). From her recital piece Sidda garners an image of fairies as “midget guardian angels with a good sense of humor” (142). She invents a similar self-image for herself: when she puts on her hand-me-down loafers, she is “a cheerleader who writes poetry” (147). Sidda escapes from the madness in her family, a version of what Vivi endured living with Buggy Abbott, “to a place in another state that doesn’t have all the hot white light of Louisiana. There are waterfalls there and the air is so sweet and easy to breathe” (142). This imaginary environment contrasts with her constricted breathing when Sidda finds herself, along with her siblings, embroiled in their parents’ heated arguments. For example, one fight rests on the power of naming; Shep has called his spouse a drunk and “just his saying that word ‘drunk’ changes everything, even changes the air in the room” (146). Instead of this kind of chaos, Sidda creates order through piano playing and school routines. Repeating the notes in her recital piece, she “feels like I can climb up inside them and live there. Piano practice is the best way I know to feel organized” (143). Similarly, she comments: “I can never fall asleep until everything is organized [for school] and ready to go at the foot of my bed” (145). Sidda needs to be resolute in her planning, as her family’s instability is a constant source of upset that in fact serves to derail her well-prepared recital piece. Sidda performs the piano recital in a schizoid manner: “somebody else’s hands—wild, shaking, and ignorant—take over. . . . I am confused, because part of me can actually hear myself playing the music *impeccably*” (151, emphasis added).

Prior to the recital upset, Sidda had appreciated the self-control

demonstrated by Sister Philomena, her piano teacher. Her mother, however, has always been ambivalent about the education her children receive at Our Lady of Divine Compassion parochial school, largely on account of the nuns being critical of her child-rearing and her marriage outside of the faith to affluent Shep, a Baptist. Yet, when conflict at home disrupts her performance in the recital, Sidda also sees the refuge in school and piano routines as illusory. Control, represented by clean, orderly, quiet Sister Philomena, is rejected. Thinking about Sister Philomena, Sidda concludes: “*You don’t even know who I am*” (153, emphasis in original).

Will Sidda find her home in words? She has been remarkably adept at using words from a young age. Both her parents note her vocabulary and insight that are unusual for a child. It is probably not coincidental that Sidda and the comparative literature professor in J. J. Steinfeld’s short story both pursue an interest in drama. Siddalee becomes a playwright. The specialization of the narrator in “Would You Hide Me?” is Samuel Beckett. She comments: “I bet Beckett would have loved the texture of my [life] story . . . *Yearning, longing*” (9, emphasis and ellipsis in original). Sidda bunkering down in a cupboard within the town bookmobile (during the scorching Louisiana summer) has chosen a location in which she feels safe. Issues of safety also occupy Steinfeld’s narrator, who is described as a “word-dweller” in relationship to her father, who was once hiding under Nazi occupation, a “forest-dweller” (15). The recurring question “Would you hide me?” speaks to the daughter’s security in words and her Jewish father’s unease now in a nursing home, and previously among non-Jews. Sidda at home among books recalls a line from her demonstrative, vocal mother: “I should have been a writer myself” (*Little Altars* 80). However, while Vivi might have found release from her mother, Buggy Abbott, through creative imagination, she didn’t. Her behavior is symptomatic, and instead of creating new output, she and Shep Walker read *Reader’s Digest* condensed books.

In response to the familial “devil dance,” Sidda’s sister Lulu resorts to thievery in order to appease her “dry heart” (174). She has learned “to reach out and take what I want for my own self” (155). She equates stealing with her mother’s manipulation of social norms to meet her own needs (157). The “*Queen of Gimme*” (177, emphasis in original) has trained the “Princess of Gimme” (155). Lulu has been caught in the act of stealing a hat for her father, whom she wants to protect from the sun that exhausts him while burning up his energy in the cotton

fields. What is interesting is the emotional chasm within, from which Lulu's need for compassion and understanding emerges. Maxine and Verna, who catch her stealing from the Cowboy Store of Thornton where they work, listen to her and hear her fictional story about her being an orphan cared for by her brother. Lulu cannot explain the tears that erupt: "I don't know where they come from, like they've been there on the edge waiting for a long time" (174). Lulu fantasizes about leaving her family and embracing the two women as guardians.

Little Shep's derision toward his mother is explained in the chapter titled "Snuggling: Little Shep, 1990." The chapter is written from the viewpoint of Little Shep, who is now married to Kane and has two children. The memories of sexual abuse by his mother haunt Little Shep's adult life. *Little Altars Everywhere* elaborates most graphically on the sexual play between the mother and her children ("kissing me and her hand would start wandering" [232]; "rub[bing] her hand across one of my nipples" [236]; "I know those breasts and I hate them" [235]). As a child, he read his mother surreptitiously and called her (silently) an "*old witch*" (122, emphasis in original). Now, as an adult, Little Shep says, "Mama acted like it was all normal, you know, like it was her right. I'm not sure what all she did with Sidda and the others—I just know what she did with me. They moved Baylor out of my room when I was in third grade. They added onto the house so we could each have our own private cell. No wonder she wanted to have us all in separate rooms. That way there wouldn't be but one at a time to witness what she was up to" (230). Further, Little Shep describes his childhood psychosomatic deafness, whereby he had lost 83 percent of his hearing in his left ear, as symptomatic of abuse: "I made the hearing go out of that ear because it's the one that faced the wall when I tried to sleep. I got tired of hearing all the shit you had to listen to in that house. If Sidda convinced Mama she was already sleeping or if the bitch hadn't gotten enough, the old lady would come into my room. And then it would start up." In consequence, as an adult, Little Shep never lets his children sleep with Kane and him, and he has "been careful from the beginning to watch how I hug them, kiss them, touch them." Furthermore, he needs to be drawn into the family by his wife and encouraged to bathe Kurt or Dorey, his own children: "But I didn't want to go near the kids while they were naked. Finally Kane got up and put a washcloth in my hand" (231).

In *Little Altars Everywhere*, sexual abuse is verified by the children among themselves and revealed to the reader primarily by Little Shep,

who offers insights into what may have occurred between Vivi and her other children. The siblings support each other by attesting to the fact of abuse and discussing its implications for themselves as adults. For example, after Little Shep wonders to himself (and, by implication, the reader)—“Did she do the same thing with Baylor?” (232)—the next page implies that sexual abuse occurred with both sons and that there are consequences of this seen in Baylor’s sexual dysfunction as an adult. On an outing at the duck camp, Baylor reveals to his brother: “Bro’, most of the time I can’t even get it up. When I do, I just want to do it and get it over with” (233). Baylor’s inseparability from Pecan Grove is also evidence of the effects of trauma. Unlike Sidda, whose reaction to abuse is escape, Baylor is confined by the experience. He tells his “big sister, I am entombed here. I will not get out of this town [Thornton] until I die” (261). The various segments in *Little Altars Everywhere* function as testimonials of abusive child-rearing and the results.⁶

In 1990 Sidda, in her late thirties and entering early middle-age, is still querying her brother Baylor over the facts of their childhood: “Bay, . . . you’re the one who told me I didn’t make it up. It all happened” (263). The chapter title “Willetta’s Witness: Willetta, 1990” (207) foregrounds the aspect of verification of events that is necessary in order for Sidda to reclaim from her unconscious and bring into conscious play her tortured childhood. “Watching,” “Seeing,” “Witnessing” are repeated words in “Willetta’s Witness.” Vivi’s black servants, Chaney, Willetta, and their daughters, Pearl and Ruby, hear and see Vivi attack the naked children: “I done heard them chilren screamin fore my eye even seen what was goin on. All four of my babies lined up against the wall of that brick house and every one of them buck naked. Miz Vivi out there with a belt, whuppin them like horses. And them just standin against the red brick. Yellin and cryin and screamin, but not even tryin to get away from her” (223). While Buggy instructs Willetta and Chaney—“I don’t want a word of this to go any further than this house, yall hear me?” (227)—and Shep “never sa[ys] . . . nothin at all” (228), Shep gives Chaney “his gold El Camino” automobile (228), a form of symbolic exchange that seems to recognize Willetta and Chaney’s intervention on behalf of the children. Vivi’s scrapbook contains information like the witnessing of Willetta that is evidence and confirmation of memory for each of the Abbott Walker children and is essential for Sidda’s return to health and functioning.

“I got to keep my gaze on them chilren till the day I die,” says

Willetta (228), even though she has two daughters and eventually grandchildren of her own. Chaney reminds Willetta that she is a “nigger-woman” (223), and Vivi insists that Chaney (“filthy nigger” [224]) not touch her and that Willetta not interfere with raising the Abbott Walker children. However, Willetta speaks her mind. She states simply: “That aint how you raise no child!” (210), unlike the white community, of which she says, “Aint nobody in this town gonna say nothin to nobody bout the way they raise they children” (221). Willetta sees the children as hers—“All four of my babies”—while Vivi dismisses this possibility by racializing Chaney and Willetta (219, 224) when they intervene in support of the children. Meanwhile, lack of recognition of the inequitable position of the African American family and the bitterness it creates within herself disturbs Willetta: “This [racial inequality] is somethin what haunt me when I pray, somethin I can’t forgive” (227).

Figures are also demarcated according to faith. Willetta reinterprets the notion of sin as a matter of conscience, not rigid principles fixed by the Church. She denigrates the impact of the Catholic Church on Vivi and dismisses the institution: “Well, I got my own thought bout what kind of church say boots [in the sanctuary] be sinful” (215). Willetta notes that while Vivi “done start up listin sins for the children” (215), “she don’t know nothin bout the Lord of mercy” (217). Buggy sees the culprit as “that Baptist husband of hers! [Vivi’s]” (227). Willetta does not forgo the Christian faith but instead identifies her own “good church home” where “they look out for you when you in need” (228). In order to appease his guilt and exercise his power to silence Chaney and Willetta after Vivi beats the children, Shep gives them a second vehicle “that coulda took us anywhere we wanted to go.” However, they do not leave Pecan Grove and their responsibilities to the family: “But even though I ain’t a big one for countin sins, leavin outta here woulda been a sin in my book” (228). Thus Willetta differentiates between sins and highlights those committed out of omission.

Willetta and Chaney remain at Pecan Grove throughout their lives keeping watch over the family’s welfare. Willetta describes the nature of Vivi’s instability: more than Vivi’s drunkenness, Willetta estimates “she [Vivi] crazy as a Betsy bug.” Finally, Willetta recognizes the long-term effects of abuse on the children: “Sweet Jesus, I seen they whole lives in front of them, how they would be when they was grown. I seen it all just by lookin at them right that minute in that yard” (225).

In leaving Pecan Grove, Sidda creates for herself a community in the theater, where she becomes capable of transcending Pecan Grove’s

insular, contained life. Here she dramatizes her own existence, including her relations with Vivi, her tormented mother. It is because Sidda's life and work is performative that she lets slip the detail about her belt-wielding mother. Sidda lives in the moment that she creates, whereas Vivi stumbles uncontrollably through an existence from which she cannot escape, and Buggy blindly lives in shadows composed of strict religious morals. Hope is signaled by Sidda's decision to marry and thus change the abusive family tradition. In the end, she is in effect accepting her personal history and the challenge to change it over her life course. While child abuse is perennial in this family (including Sidda's father's side, as well), there is hope as abuse becomes less prevalent among Sidda's siblings, while Sidda uses language and, especially, the theater to articulate her difference from her predecessors. In the theater Sidda has facilitated cathartic alternative roles on stage and played new roles for herself among friends. As her costume designer Wade Coenen notes, in pouring Sidda a comforting glass of brandy, "Glorious theater. It creates family for all kinds of orphans" (*Divine Secrets* 182). Sidda's stamina is tested when her fiancé, Connor, suggests that she consider her mother as a figure in a play: "He held the [scrap]book up closer to Sidda's face. 'Look at them. Look at them like you look at actors, without yourself in the way'" (312). At this point Sidda cannot imagine her family scene without herself as central to the plot.

Part of her discovery on the pathway to spiritual healing and recovery requires a revaluation of power. Events would have unfolded as they did regardless of her role; however, as a result of growing up at Pecan Grove, she still must cope with the consequences of abuse. Caro insists, "You've got Ya-Ya blood, Siddalee. Whether you like it or not. And sure, it's tainted" (*Divine Secrets* 305).

Sidda must learn to balance acceptance of her past with the ability to become detached from it. This part of her spiritual journey takes her back to positive aspects of her youth when, in 1963, at the Girl Scout camp overseen by the Ya-Ya Sisters, she had an illumination: "I see all the ordinary stuff . . . lit up from inside so their everyday selves have holy sparks in them, and if people could only see those sparks, they'd go and kneel in front of them and pray and just feel good. Somehow the whole world looks like little altars everywhere" (*Little Altars* 22). Sidda's journey back into the Ya-Ya fold recovers not only the guilt-encompassed altars of Our Lady of Divine Compassion parochial school but also, importantly, untainted, visionary altars, which are a source of creativity and hope.

Reconciliation and Hope

While the scrapbook may facilitate Sidda's "return of [adjusted] memory" (Schwarz 40) and her marriage (her personal way of writing herself into social practice), Sidda's own testimony in her *New York Times* interview in the 1990s implies the possibility of legal action. Within the purview of the story, though, it is perhaps opening the personal into the social realm that causes Vivi's shame and punishment (in the construction of a Ya-Ya Native healing circle). In an effort to restore her own dignity, which is affronted by the fact of child abuse, Vivi attempts to exclude the victim. As in tribal justice, it is Vivi who is temporarily ostracized by her soul mates. The Ya-Yas who are witnesses to each family's commingled existence, including their misery, know that the words, images, and objects that are part of the scrapbook will assist Sidda with "reestablishing dialogue between [her]self and [the] world" (ibid.). The facticity represented by the Ya-Ya scrapbook, its referential bias, is required in order for Sidda to test the validity of family frames of understanding that do not mirror her recollections. If the family image has been emptied of relevant experience, Sidda's self-image will be incomplete. Her mother's social guilt has managed to erase relevant experience that her daughter needs to know about.

Vivi is sorrowful for the suffering she inflicted on her children, and she mourns her daughter's absence, which is a consequence of abuse. Teensy asks Vivi during her separation from Sidda, "Don't you miss her?" to which Vivi replies, "I miss Sidda horribly. I think about her all the time" (*Divine Secrets* 255–56). Sidda is accepting her mother's sorrow when she brings her mother the gift of a lachrymatory at her wedding to Connor, which occurs at Pecan Grove at the end of *Divine Secrets*: "A tiny jar of tear drops. In olden days it was one of the greatest gifts you could give someone. It meant you loved them, that you shared a grief that brought you together" (348). The Ya-Ya circle remains torn until Vivi and Sidda rejoin it by reconciling over their "grief" at the wedding. Through the concern over her daughter's psychological well-being, Vivi grows as an emotionally charged human being, but she does not change the direction of her journey. Vivi understands her limitations and differences from Sidda as generational. In Vivi's words, "I was born before you could do what you wanted" (*Little Altars* 315). Vivi's patterns of interaction are interpersonal within her growing multigenerational family and with her Ya-Ya friends—affectively communicating that she has done harm, which she is trying to ameliorate on

a personal level.⁷ In the prewedding gift exchange between Sidda and Vivi, Vivi gives Sidda her sweet-sixteen ring, which was a gift, symbolizing female maturity, to Vivi from her father and which her mother Buggy wanted to deny by taking the ring away. Signifying the completion of the healing circle, the ring given to Sidda also symbolizes her mature capacity to change her life by continuing to develop within the Ya-Ya circle, but in ways different from Buggy's and Vivi's examples.

The stories kept by the Ya-Yas, now older women, provide a mediating factor for cleansing and healing in subsequent generations. Repetition compulsion toward domestic failure prevented Sidda from going ahead with her marriage plans. However, with the reading of the scrapbook, what before was the "stagnant," dredged-up, traumatic past becomes available for Sidda's scrutiny and use.⁸ The Ya-Ya relationships revealed in the scrapbook have developed over generations and are a rich source of what Habermas refers to as "meaning-potential" for the future (215).⁹ The fullness of Willetta and Chaney's viewpoint and the abundance of the old women's history that is etched in the scrapbook are implied also by Constance Rooke's introductory comments to *Night Light: Stories of Aging*. According to Rooke, "The old person is an especially useful protagonist since he or she makes available to the writer nearly the whole span of a life history—as opposed to just that truncated, glibly predictive bit before the heroine decides whom to marry" (ix). These remarks speak to Rebecca Wells's novels, which represent the life spans of at least eight characters of advanced years—particularly those of the four Ya-Yas, but also Willetta, Chaney, Buggy, and Shep.

By way of the newly found evidence that wants processing by Sidda (and reevaluation by the Ya-Yas in her company), Sidda's trajectory forward into marriage circles back to her own childhood and the Ya-Yas' youth in the 1960s recounted in the first half of *Little Altars Everywhere*. In this way Wells's Ya-Ya fiction subscribes to the circular staircase model that Rooke sees in stories of aging (xi). Moving forward with Sidda's life requires circling back through a process that revisits the lives of her father, the Ya-Yas, Buggy, and Chaney and Willetta. Similarly, the theme of turning suffering into love—modeled in present-day healing circles, truth commissions, and other ritual practices—developed throughout Rebecca Wells's texts and the film version of *Divine Secrets* circles back to the epigraph of *Little Altars Everywhere*: "Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change. So suffering must become love." Communication facilitates

change and love, which characterize Sidda's growth. Interest in the goings-on within Thornton, Louisiana, extends far beyond the southern American states. The mostly female followers of the wildly popular Ya-Ya material make use of the stories about Sidda and her mother and family in their own lives. On the lively Rebecca Wells Internet site, evidence of a similar back-and-forth process is found in the response and engagement of readers, both with the explosive themes in her fiction and with each other.

Notes

1. Shoshana Felman defines and gives examples of psychological trauma: "Psychological trauma occurs as a result of an overwhelming, uncontrollable and terrifying experience, usually a violent event or events or the prolonged exposure to such events. The emotional damage often remains hidden, as though the person were unharmed. The full scope of the symptoms manifests itself only belatedly, sometimes years and years later. The trigger of the symptoms is often an event that unconsciously reminds the subject of the original traumatic scene, and is thus lived as a repetition of the trauma. Trauma thus results in lifelong psychological liabilities, and continues to have delayed aftereffects throughout one's existence. Classic examples of traumatic catalysts include wars, concentration camp experiences, prison experiences, terrorism incidents, auto and industrial accidents, and childhood traumas such as incest or sexual and physical abuse" (171). I am indebted to Jeanie Warnock, whose work sparked my interest in trauma studies, and to Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, editor and friend.

2. Author-actress Rebecca Wells had her own experience of trauma—she began writing novels after an injury prevented her from acting (*Little Altars* xvii).

3. Dominick LaCapra spells out the relationship between memory and trauma, in a way that is helpful for grasping the inevitability of trauma resurfacing—in Sidda's case, during an interview celebrating her career. "Yet the memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with the tendency compulsively to repeat, relive, be possessed by, or act out traumatic scenes of the past, whether in more or less controlled artistic procedures or in uncontrolled existential experiences of hallucination, flashback, dream, and retraumatizing breakdown triggered by incidents that more or less obliquely recall the past. In this sense, what is denied or repressed in a lapse of memory does not disappear; it returns in a transformed, at times disfigured and disguised manner" (10).

4. Caruth identifies the mediating function of the encounter with the "other," in this case eventually Sidda's mother, as crucial for healing, as "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, [and] . . . may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another" (8).

5. Laing and Esterson investigate psychopathology in order to separate out roles that individuals perform in dysfunctional families: "The way in which a family deploys itself in space and time, what space, what time, and what things

are private or shared, and by whom—these and many other questions are best answered by seeing what sort of world the family has itself fleshed out for itself, both as a whole and differentially for each of its members” (21). In her reflections, while reading the scrapbook, Sidda is in effect performing an analysis of herself within the Walker family. According to Hayden White, with reference to psychotherapy: “The problem is to get the patient to ‘reemplot’ his whole life history in such a way as to change the *meaning* of those events for him and their *significance* for . . . the whole set of events that make up his life. . . . We might say that the events are detraumatized by being removed from the plot structure in which they have a dominant place and inserted in another in which they have a subordinate or simply ordinary function as elements of a life shared with all other [women and] men” (87, emphasis in original).

6. For a wide-ranging discussion of the forms and implications of testimony, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*.

7. In conclusion, it seems necessary to note another pattern at play in the series, a progressive movement toward personal independence from lives determined by traumatic events—war, sexual and physical abuse, and racism, for instance. *Ya-Yas in Bloom* includes the first, second, and third generations of Ya-Yas in the ending, an extended family Christmas celebration. The event shows that eventually the suffering of *Little Altars Everywhere* has been considerably diffused, that suffering is being worked through now that the past has been admitted.

8. Little Shep gives special significance to the word *stagnant*. Making allusion to the extent of child abuse in Pecan Grove, he recalls “that brick house on the bayou,” his childhood home, “that stinking bayou of thick brown water that didn’t move. Stagnant water that was full of shit you couldn’t see, couldn’t guess at, didn’t even want to know about” (*Little Altars* 239).

9. Habermas’s theory of communicative competence could help us classify the hope that is signaled by keeping memory alive and responsibly passing it on to Sidda. In his view, “this transfer of semantic contents from the prelinguistic into the common stock of language widens the scope of communicative action as it diminishes that of unconsciously motivated action” (215).

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CHAPTER 10



Surviving the Colonialist Legacy of the Klondike Gold Rush

*A Native Woman Elder's Liberatory
and Integrative Storytelling Turn*

SUSAN BERRY BRILL DE RAMÍREZ

How does a traditional Native American elder in the Yukon maintain a spiritual balance in the face of the catastrophic consequences of Euroamerican colonization, and what is the intriguing yet crucial role that stories play in that process of personal and tribal survivance? Angela Sidney's life spanned the Klondike gold rush era and most of the twentieth century, encompassing the development of tribal colleges and a renowned international storytelling festival hosted annually in Whitehorse that she helped cofound and in which she regularly participated during her later years. She told her ethnographer, Julie Cruikshank, "Well, I've tried to live my life right, just like a story" (*Life Lived* 20). In these few words, Sidney communicates her people's oral storytelling heuristic that demonstrates ways of living for tribal members' consideration, learning, and application. As Native American writer and oral tradition scholar Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) expresses at the outset of her novel *Ceremony*:

I will tell you something about stories,

...

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off
illness and death. (2)

For Sidney, her fellow indigenous elders in the Yukon, and many of the indigenous peoples of the world, there is a deep and enduring valuation of the power that stories exert for the health, balance, and integrity of persons, families, clans, tribes, and communities. As Silko makes very clear, stories are far more than mere entertainment; they provide a crucial means for the transmission of tribal and family history, moral and ethical guidance, and spiritual and ceremonial practice.

In Cruikshank's volume *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*, the three Native women elders all affirm the sacred station held by words, speech, and stories. One of the women, Annie Ned, was described as "a powerful figure in southern Yukon society, where she has lived for almost a century . . . and is recognized throughout the Yukon as having special knowledge about spiritual power"; Ned stresses "the power of words . . . [and] the value of discretion," noting "that only a fool speaks indiscriminately [and that] the inappropriate use of words can bring serious consequences to both speaker and listener" (355). Within an aboriginal worldview, stories and their words are understood to wield both creative and destructive power. The speaker of language and the teller of stories have great responsibilities in the choice of their words, but the conversive (conversational and transforming) nature of oral storytelling means that listeners, too, wield co-creative control in their respective fleshing out of the told stories. When Cruikshank sought to record the autobiographies of Native women elders in the Yukon Territory of Canada, the women made it very clear that storytelling among their people was understood to be symbolically coded with multiple and overlapping meanings which are interwoven throughout and which require the co-creative effort on the part of the listener-reader for meaningful understanding. Silko confirms the listener's active participation in stating that the story lies within the listeners, waiting for the storyteller's assisted unearthing—much like Socrates' description of the oral philosopher as a midwife ("Language" 57).

The stories that the old Yukon women related can be broadly delineated within the categories of personal life histories and traditional tribal or clan myths; however, in the custom of skilled and guiding storytellers, the stories that the women chose to tell (whether traditional or historical) offer explicit and implicit life lessons, which are

invariably informed by the ancient and sacred teachings of the women's respective tribes and clans. The older aboriginal women pointed out that "practical and spiritual knowledge are inextricably enmeshed: women used the same sets of abilities to confront transcendent beings and to survive in everyday life" (*Life Lived* 344). Therefore, the ethical and moral guidance within stories, whether they were mythical or historical, was directly relevant to the women's lives (and, more broadly, for virtually any person's life). This chapter presents an introduction to ethnographically produced Native women's autobiography through the storytelling lens of one of the Native women elders: Tagish/Tlingit elder Angela Sidney. By means of a close conversive reading of several of her stories, the sacred center of those stories will be seen to emerge from behind the surface texts of traditional myths and historical stories of the Klondike gold rush, Euroamerican and Eurocanadian colonization, missionization, residential schools, and tribal and familial continuance. While Sidney affirms the importance that the sacred has manifested throughout her life, in her later years as a Bahá'í, her spiritual trajectory has led toward an integrative globalism enabling her to maintain and interweave her faith in her tribal sacred traditions and the Anglican Church in a postcolonial coherence.

The past five-hundred-year history of global European colonization and conquest privileged the realms of geopolitical resource appropriations (land, mineral, vegetation, human) and religious conversion. An inclusive openness and recognition of the different approaches to the sacred across tribes led many indigenous *Americans* (lexically signifying a broad hemispheric demographic) to respond to Christian missionization with a theological sophistication that few Europeans or subsequent Euroamericans could comprehend. Many Native peoples embraced what they saw as spiritual truths within Christianity, while still maintaining faith in their tribal sacred traditions (*Contemporary American*, Brill de Ramírez 96–115), notwithstanding the fact that church theologies posited an exclusivity that bespoke a spiritual worldview categorically divergent from that of the indigenous affirmation of the sacred in its diverse manifestations. In *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, historian Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) explains that Native people understood that different peoples and tribes had different sacred practices and teachings and that each tribe's religion was comparable in truth value to that of every other tribe: "No tribe, however, asserted its [religious and tribal] history as having primacy over the accounts of any other tribe. . . . Differing tribal accounts [of

creation and oral tradition] were given credence because it was not a matter of trying to establish power over others to claim absolute truth" (100). Such openness of religious diversity contrasted significantly with the church dogma and missionary zeal that precluded acceptance of the validity of indigenous sacred tradition.

In light of the destructive religious history of the missionization of aboriginal peoples,¹ religious studies professor Jace Weaver (Cherokee) notes, "Remarkably, despite brutality, a great many Natives did willingly embrace the alien faith, and some of them went on to carry the message to others" (*Native American* 5; also *Other Words* 285). Stan McKay, a Cree member of the United Church of Canada, offers his First Nations perspective regarding the similarities that he notes among traditional Native beliefs and the ancient tribal teachings of the Hebrew people as related in the Old Testament: "We, like them, come out of an oral tradition which is rooted in the Creator and the creation. We, like Moses, know about the sacredness of the earth and the promise of land. Our creation stories also emphasize the power of the Creator and the goodness of creation" (qtd. in *Treat* 52). Like McKay and many of the other indigenous peoples of the Americas (especially throughout Latin America), Sidney's spiritual beliefs and practice included a delicate combination of Christianity and aboriginal sacred ways, notwithstanding her experiences with the hegemonic impositions of colonialist missionization in the Yukon.

The Anglican Church was the central Christianizing force in Sidney's life: "Shortly before Angela's birth, the Anglican Church had established a mission at Carcross, where it set up a residential school known as Chooutla school" (*Life Lived* 31). Throughout her life Sidney was active in both church activities and her tribal and clan sacred traditions. Although the church presented itself in contradistinction to indigenous belief, Sidney's traditional openness and inclusiveness enabled her to embrace both traditions as aspects of one overarching realm of the sacred. Her lifelong commitment to the sacred makes it not so surprising that, late in life, she would follow a number of her relatives in accepting the holistic teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, in which she found an affirmation of the sacred in its myriad and diverse forms. Cruikshank explains that Sidney "has become actively involved in the Bahá'í faith. She has paid a great deal of attention to reconciling her present beliefs with the shamanistic ideas she learned from her parents, uncles, and aunts, and with her own longstanding membership in the Anglican Church. Her account has a splendid coherence, and as

usual, she makes narrative connections between events in her past and present life" (*Life Lived* 36). Sidney specifically points to prophetic statements of a tribal elder who lived prior to the colonization of the Yukon. She and her relatives believe that the Bahá'í Faith represents the fulfillment of the prophecies of a renowned Pelly River medicine man (*ibid.* 154–58).

For Sidney and many of the world's aboriginal peoples, the sacred is very simply and profoundly a way of living. Sidney draws on her knowledge of traditional storytelling to understand how the people are to live, including those stories' moral and ethical imperatives and their respective senses of tribal, clan, family, and regional history. Within such an interpretive frame, Sidney interrelates "two prophecy narratives" to show "that intellectually there is no necessary conflict between Anglicanism, Bahá'í, and indigenous shamanism. She is able to use this framework to provide an entirely satisfactory explanation of her ability to integrate ideas that others might find contradictory" (Cruikshank, *Social Life* 133). The colonial missionization of the Yukon brought Christianity to the aboriginal peoples of that region, and as a result the people were introduced to religious doctrine that privileged particular Christian denominations at the expense of other religious and sacred practices. While Sidney did accept the truth of Christianity and was an active member of the Anglican Church, she also maintained her faith and participation in her aboriginal sacred traditions. Contented with her separate faiths in Christianity and tribal ways and having been taught church exclusivity, Sidney initially resisted becoming involved in the Bahá'í Faith: "I think I was the last one joined in because I'm Anglican. All of my kids joined the Bahá'í. That's why I joined in, me, too" (*Life Lived* 155). She points out a number of reasons for her acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith: the importance of a unified extended family participation, past tribal prophecies, and a belief in religious inclusiveness. As she related to Cruikshank, "When I think about that Baha'i faith [*sic*], it just brings back remembrance of that old Major [the shaman], what he said. I think about it. . . . That's why I joined it. But still Baha'i never told us to quit going to church. . . . I sure like to go to church, keep up my old religion" (*ibid.* 158). As a highly respected traditional elder, Sidney comes to the Bahá'í Faith finding a sacred way that confirms her tribal and Christian faiths by means of a postcolonial global inclusiveness that enables her to rise above the divisive views and consequences of the Eurocanadian colonial missionization of the Yukon.

At the surface levels of ritual, dogma, and practice, the dichotomies between the three faith-based traditions would make Sidney's embrace of all three patently mystifying to many; yet through the deeper storytelling lens of the religious traditions' conversive roots, Sidney finds each focused on a lived relationship with/in the sacred, all of creation, and a creator—regardless of each faith's respective cultural, geographic, and historical differences. Sidney well understood the diversity of the world's cultures: as a Native woman whose life spanned the twentieth-century Yukon, her life and world were defined by the intersections of Russian, American, Canadian, and aboriginal worlds. As a traditional Native elder, she also understood the deeply rooted interconnections that pervaded what she saw to be an inherently and intricately interdependent world. Her family's involvement in the Bahá'í Faith demonstrates a worldmindedness that coheres a diversity of experience within the scope of the sacred as understood in both conversively interwoven and historically diverse ways.

In spite of her global awareness, commitment, and activities late in life (and perhaps also because of all this), Sidney's life and stories are expressly elucidative of her times and tribal cultures. As Cruikshank notes, "Mrs. Sidney is well known in the southern Yukon as a narrator of traditional stories and as a teacher of Tagish and Tlingit customs" (qtd. in Sidney, *Place Names* 1). In fact, Sidney was one of the cofounders of the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, in Whitehorse, with its strong emphasis on the traditional cultures of the diverse yet interrelated circumpolar regions; Sidney was an active storytelling participant at the festival even in the final year of her life (1991). She worked tirelessly with Cruikshank to record stories and information about her people that she felt important for future generations—producing many collected volumes such as *Tagish Tlaagú: Tagish Stories* (1982). Her stories straddle the realms of ancient and precolonial indigenous America and the subsequent and continuing colonial realities of contemporary Canada and the United States (with the Yukon spanning both nations).

An interpretive turn to the conversive accesses several of Sidney's life history and traditional stories, opening their storyworlds to their listener-readers with the intimacy of a familial storytelling circle, welcoming a diversity of readers who might otherwise be alienated from the stories by virtue of distances in geography, culture, language, and times. Regardless of the ostensive content of her stories, each story invariably revolves around its sacred center that holds all together

within its centripetal attractive force. As Weaver affirms, Native American sacred traditions manifest a distinctively “communal character” that he contrasts with the Christian emphasis on personal salvation: “Native religious traditions are not practiced for personal empowerment or fulfillment but rather to ensure the corporate good” (*Native American Religious Identity* 21). For Sidney, the mere act of sharing her stories is a means whereby she consciously intends to perpetuate the integrity of her people’s traditions and values. Deloria explains that this indigenous sense of community welfare holistically embraces the whole of creation—with each person’s integrative commitment to live in concord “with other living things and to develop the self-discipline within the tribal community so that man acts harmoniously with other creatures . . . [understanding that humans] are dependent on everything in creation for their existence” (88). Sidney’s stories are oriented within a very clearly defined geography and sense of spatial belonging, which are also the sites of familial and tribal devastation at the hands of the colonizing powers. Yet even in the poignantly painful stories of her people’s colonization and the tragic effects on her own family, Sidney’s stories speak a sacred center that welcomes and embraces all. She shares her stories in the powerfully moving voice of a conversive storyteller who wants her readers to step into her stories and experience them from within, understanding the events deeply and empathically and, with her, emerging from those stories with new vision by which we, too, can orient our lives. In this fashion, we are invited into a decidedly non-Western world where older women’s stories and relationships provide the mainstays of their people’s sacred centers. As such, we engage a sacred vision of the world that articulates an applied spirituality to be manifested in consciously interrelational and interdependent ways of living. Several of Sidney’s stories provide examples of the sort of interpersonal spirituality by which she guides her life, but in light of the collaboratively ethnographic process of recording her stories for textual publication, it is necessary to document that process in order to show her ownership of the stories and her conversive craft in their telling.

Native American Autobiography, Ethnography, and Conversive Storytelling

At what point do a Native American woman’s stories that emanate

from her own life experiences fit within the reifying boundaries of “autobiography” and “ethnography,” and what tools do readers need in order to understand those stories within the respective familial, tribal, regional, and sociohistorical origins of the tales? Through a conversively informed listening-reading approach, readers can begin to step through the ethnographically constructed text in order to access their originating stories. As readers and interpreters of any ethnography, we have great responsibilities in how we respond to that material. The converseive (co-creative, relational, transformative) nature of storytelling invites an interactive participation in the stories that lie beyond the textual surface. As I explain elsewhere, at the center of converseive communications are relationships; the term “converseive” conveys both senses of “transformational and regenerative power (conversion) and the intersubjective relationality between the storyteller and listener (conversation)” (*Contemporary American*, Brill de Ramírez 6–7). This can be seen in the various converseive structures and strategies used by storytellers, “such as the privileging of relationality over individuality, domains in which meaningfulness is defined relationally rather than semiotically, voice shifts that reflect the presence and necessity of participatory listener-readers, and repetition for learning rather than for memorization” (ibid. 6). But this requires converseive reading (listening) strategies on the part of readers and converseive mediating strategies on the part of ethnographers and editors in order to facilitate Native storytellers’ storytelling on paper.²

Kevin Dwyer asserts that anthropology “creates otherness and objectifies it” (142). While this is true, it is not invariably the case. In the collaboratively constructed volume *Life Lived Like a Story*, Cruikshank assisted three Native women elders in transmitting their stories through a textual medium. Cruikshank took great pains to work *with* three First Nations women elders in the Yukon (Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned) in helping them record whatever stories they chose to relate and preserve for their children, grandchildren, future descendants, and other readers. In the development of this volume (and the other publications produced from her time in the Yukon), from start to finish, Cruikshank’s work centered on the establishment of deep and enduring relationships with those with whom she worked. This distinctive aspect of the project led to a very empowered, open, and willing storytelling on the part of these old grandmothers, who felt sufficiently comfortable to refocus the direction and method of their work with Cruikshank when necessary.³

All three of the Native women with whom Cruikshank worked took their respective responsibilities for the volume very seriously. In their storytelling, they include many conversive strategies to help their listeners and listener-readers become part of the stories—and this becoming is the crucial transformative step toward meaningful and deep understandings of the stories. In contrast to texts, Native American oral stories are to be understood conversively from within. A number of diverse yet interrelated literary critical reading strategies can move us toward this end, but to access the range of co-creatively reciprocal and lived storytelling meaning, the reader must become a listening-reading participant and find meaning, thereby, from a lived interaction with the story from within (*Contemporary American*, Brill de Ramírez 6–7, 129–54).⁴ All three of the Native women storytellers use voice shifts, conjunctions of diverse times and places, episodic and associational structurings, conjunctions of the everyday and the mythic, personification of nonhumans, emphatic expressions and silences, song and prayer, and additional explanations of details in the stories that listeners might need. Interestingly, all of these strategies are employed at different points in their stories and not only in the traditional stories or myths but also in the more everyday stories about their own lives and experiences. Through the lived relationships established among the three Native women elders and Julie Cruikshank, all four of the women's voices come through clearly, directly, and honestly, regardless of the layers of textual mediation involved in the ethnographic process.⁵

Cruikshank explains that all three of the women maintained control over what they chose to relate. In response to direct questions about their own lives, more often than not the women would tell stories that rarely were straightforward answers to the original questions. These answers, often crafted in the aporetic and open-ended form of stories, shifted the discussion away from the discursive realm of information and toward the conversive domain of meaning. Cruikshank explains this part of their working process by noting, “Although the older women responded patiently to my line of inquiry for a while, they quite firmly shifted the emphasis to ‘more important’ accounts they wanted me to record—particularly events central to traditional narrative” (*Life Lived* 14). For these women, clearly the larger and deeper meanings of traditional stories were seen as much more important than the more limited scope of the specific details of their lives. What the women chose to emphasize were stories rather than information.

In response to Cruikshank's requests for lived histories from the gold rush era of the Yukon, what Cruikshank received were cryptic traditional stories with little obvious connection to that historical period. While *Life Lived Like a Story* asserts its emphasis on the old women's stories, the book's presentation emphasizes Cruikshank's initiating historical agenda in which she sought information "that might contribute to land claims negotiations" (June 24, 2000, letter). As Cruikshank explicitly notes, the traditional stories offered in response to her questions at first confused her until she was able to take those stories and interpret them as explanations about parts of the women's own lives (*Life Lived* 15). Thereby, the book as a whole appears to be primarily focused on the women's own personal life histories, but as a conversive listening-reading approach demonstrates, the larger focus and orientation of the book and its stories are rooted within the very historical inquiry that began the project in the first place, namely, the Klondike gold rush. Sidney and the other women consciously chose to tell the story of the gold rush deeply and meaningfully through carefully selected and intricately interwoven life history and mythic stories. When read conversively, the volume *Life Lived Like a Story* becomes a powerfully moral tale about the ways by which people can survive cataclysmic upheavals, such as the hurried gold rush colonization of the lands and peoples of the Yukon (perhaps with Bear representing Russian presence as well).

A close look at one of Sidney's "traditional" stories will help clarify the conversive process of oral storytelling that, on paper, invites reader participation as co-creative listener-readers. As Silko explains, "The storytelling always includes the audience and the listeners, and, in fact, a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storytellers' role is to draw the story out of the listeners" ("Language" 57). Cruikshank confirms this specifically in relation to Sidney's craft: "Angela Sidney understood, as only the most talented storytellers can, the importance of performance—how performance involves not simply a narrator but also an audience, and how narrator and audience both change with time and circumstances, giving any one story the potential range of meanings that all good stories have" (*Social Life* 28). To understand stories is to engage with them in the close intersubjective manner of conversive relations. When we interpret stories that are told to us from the distanced lens of outside observers, not recognizing the extent to which we, as story-listeners, are participants in the stories as much as are the storyteller and story characters, then the stories, their

characters, and their events often appear “bewildering” to us (*Life Lived* 15). What is required, however, is to move the reading process away from the objectifying “artifaction” of Native women’s lives and toward a conversation between the listener-reader, the Native women storytellers, their stories, and their ethnographer-editor. As Hertha D. Sweet Wong explains, “numerous kinds of relational subjectivities are possible, that a subject . . . may be more or less individual or more or less relational in diverse contexts” (168). Each of the women elders’ stories is interconnected and interwoven, in light of the women’s own interwoven lives, the interwoven historicity of their stories, and the interwoven nature of stories. This requires readers who will reorient their expectations of a primary focus on the women’s lives with the traditional mythic stories as a gloss and, instead, approach all of the stories as interrelated parts of the larger stories of human survival, Yukon colonization, and indigenous sacred expression.

Continuance Through Tragedy in the Story “How People Got Flint”

As one of the most well-known storytellers in the Yukon, Angela Sidney was still at the height of her storytelling craft when she worked with Cruikshank. Our attention to her stories echoes their importance among her people, for in the Yukon most of the First Nations storytellers are women (*Life Lived* 346–47) analogous to the old women *griottes* of Africa, whose wealth of stories are viewed as extensive libraries. In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha notes that “the World’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women” and that the death of each *griotte* is the equivalent loss of “a whole library” (121). Although Sidney’s stories are presented as life-history narratives, their relevance and meaningfulness are much broader. In the tradition of indigenous oral storytelling, Sidney conversively crafts both her life history and mythic tribal stories with complexly interwoven threads that articulate intricate stories of great suffering because of, and remarkable survival despite, the colonization of the Yukon. In the introductory discussion that precedes Sidney’s section of the book, Cruikshank notes that Sidney repeatedly emphasized that the stories needed to be pondered and considered deeply. Sidney relates that, as a child, she learned the importance of thinking about stories in order to discover their meanings (*Life Lived* 31). Cruikshank was forced to

consider this in her own engagements with Sidney's stories: "Whenever I ask her what it is that children actually learn from these stories, she replies by repeating the story for me. The messages, she suggests, are implicit, self-evident; the text, she would argue, should speak for itself" (ibid. 32). Sidney simply repeats the story. With each retelling, there would be some slight variations, perhaps simply some alterations in tonal emphasis or special pauses in which the storyteller might intend her listener to hear the emphatic voice shifts as a means of making those connective links even easier to traverse and, thereby, to understand (*Contemporary American*, Brill de Ramírez 129, 222).

A conversive listening-reading approach to Sidney's stories involves the reader in the considered interweaving of those diverse stories whose episodic and associational meaningfulness becomes apparent once they are understood in close juxtaposition as facets of the larger unfolding story. By breaking up the constructed life-history narratives in the text and interrelating the traditional mythic stories with the women's own lived stories, we can see how each story comes to enrich and illuminate the others in strikingly meaningful ways. In this manner, rich symbolic and metaphoric allusions in the life-history stories emerge, along with historical facticity in the traditional stories. As folklorist John Miles Foley clarifies, "As we study the oral record more thoroughly, we learn that the oral tradition is often more accurate historically than the written record." And, as this essay elucidates, mythic stories, too, can shed historical light. For example, the first traditional story in the childhood section of Sidney's stories, "How People Got Flint," centers upon themes of imperialist disempowerment that lead to potentially genocidal effects, with the especially tragic deaths of little children: "My kids all froze up on me"; desires for retributive justice: "Let them die like a stone"; the importance of close family relations: "Oh, Grandpa, . . . I guess you're right"; the importance of people helping each other out: "Go all over the world. People need you"; struggles to survive hardships in this world: "People were having a hard time"; and the realities of death and life after death: "when people are dead, they come back like this" (*Life Lived* 73–74).

In "How People Got Flint," Bear is the only person who has flint to make fires for warmth. Because of Bear's appropriation of the flint, everyone else is struggling to survive the cold. Mouse tricks Bear and steals the flint, but since Mouse is little and could be caught by Bear, Mouse throws the flint to the other animals. Fox takes the flint and runs away, throwing it on some rocks where it breaks into smaller

pieces. Then Fox throws the flint all over the world so that everyone will have it. Although this seems like an end to the story, Sidney chooses to continue the story, relating that Fox then takes some dry rhubarb and pushes it into a lake. When the rhubarb floats back up to the surface, Fox says, "I wish that when people are dead, they come back like this"—depicting a desire for earthly reincarnation. Bear, who is still upset with everyone for stealing "his" flint, responds in a contrary manner: he throws a rock in the lake which sinks, saying, "I wish that when people die they would be like that. Let them die like a stone" (74). Bear's anger is emphasized by additional line spacing on the page after this statement, indicating Sidney's emphatic pause after Bear's comment. After this line spacing, the storyteller says, "He was mad," followed by another emphatic pause to really stress Bear's response. Sidney then ends the story with the framing device of a grandfather relating the story to his grandchild.

A close conversive listening-reading of Sidney's story "How People Got Flint" conveys a number of teaching messages and meanings available to the listener-reader. These messages and meanings are accessible via different conversive cues throughout the story that work to get the listener-reader's attention and to alert her or him to elements indicative of deep meaning. Obvious elements of the story that would be immediately recognizable to readers unfamiliar with traditional storytelling strategies are the attribution of personhood and intentionality to animals and the interconnections and interdependencies between different animals and humans. Silko explains, "The remains of things—animals and plants, the clay and the stones—were treated with respect. Because for the ancient people all these things had spirit and being" ("Landscape" 83). As James R. Holmes comments about our determinations regarding the status of personhood, "Up to the present time, we have recognized as persons only those individuals who have the embodiment of *homo sapiens*, namely human beings. There is, however, nothing about the concept of a person that requires persons to be human beings" (30). Sometimes traditional stories with animals as the main characters do actually tell us about those specific types of animals, but often such personifications of animals serve as a strategy that enables the telling of stories in ways that avoid the specificity of particular individuals or groups of human persons. Most readers would be familiar with this strategy in its various contemporary manifestations in comic strips and cartoons.

Interestingly, Sidney's story about flint, a bear, a fox, and other

animals is entitled “How People Got Flint,” which leads the reader to initially assume that the term “people” refers to human persons. Sidney begins her story by relating that only Bear had flint and that “people were having a hard time—sometimes fire would go out, you know” (73). In this one statement, Sidney includes longer emphatic pauses (marked by the text’s punctuation of a dash or period) for her listener-readers’ reflection upon those hard times, further indicated by the direct address of the second-person voice shift. To ensure that her listeners and listener-readers do not limit their interpretations of the story to the surface levels of textual information and literal meanings, Sidney’s craft frustrates any potential simplistic understandings of her stories. Immediately after telling us how hard a time the people were having, she complicates our ideas about the people’s hard times without fire by both broadening and deepening the very concept of what constitutes people or persons in the world. She does this by adding more information about those “people” who were really struggling: “Mice are the ones that really got it” (e.g., had a hard time [73]). Here Sidney personifies mice as some of the little people (small, diminutive, those with little power) who were having such a hard time. Sidney also uses two other conversive strategies to emphasize the personhood of animals: referencing them with names (Bear, Mouse, Fox) as proper nouns and depicting them behaving in ways similar to humans, such as having Mouse and Fox *throw* the flint to keep it away from the much bigger and more powerful Bear.

At this point, one might still be tempted to bracket out the complex identification of animals as persons and simply trivialize the story as an animal story with little or no direct relevance to human persons in the world. However, Sidney includes three additional elements to her story that prevent this. The first is her explanation of the importance of flint to help with keeping fires lit. This reference at the very beginning of her story clearly delineates and emphasizes the importance of flint as something directly relevant to human persons. She also ends her story with a referent that emphasizes the importance of this story for human persons. By both beginning and ending the story with human referents, Sidney makes it completely clear that this story is far more than a simplistic animal story. In her concluding frame to the story, the story’s relevance for human persons is made manifest in the fact that the story is presented as being told by a grandfather to his grandchild. While the animal characters make the story that much more accessible to children and also clarify the story’s fictional,

ahistorical, and mythical nature, the specific references to actual realities in the world (the widespread presence of flint, the importance of flint for people's fires, and the nature of human death) directly emphasize the deeper significances for human persons. The final events of the story with the rhubarb stalk and rock in the lake and the grandfather's concluding comments to his grandchild further underscore the relevance of the story specifically for human persons. In these events, we learn about human mortality and life after death.

The story additionally teaches the importance of interpersonal cooperation (with Mouse and Fox providing flint for everyone) and not being selfish and mean (as is Bear who wants to keep the flint just for himself, even though as a bear with lots of fur, he did not even need the flint in the first place). However, the coded nature of traditional storytelling is such that even these more literal and simpler aspects of the story can be understood in much more complex and meaningful ways for adults. As Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser point out, "Coding occurs in the context of complex audiences, in situations where some of the audience may be competent to decode the message, but others—including those who might be dangerous—are not. Thus a coded text is by definition complex, and its messages may be ambiguous" (414). In fact, James Clifford states that this is also the very process of ethnography, which "is actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. . . . Ethnography decodes and recodes" ("Partial Truths" 2, emphasis in original). Presumably, with any ethnographic work we have multiple levels of encoding and decoding at work for the reader and listener-reader to decipher.

The associational and episodic structuring of traditional storytelling provides many of the additional connective links necessary to understand the deeper meaningfulness of the stories. For example, when the trickster Crow stories are told juxtaposed "in a series" of stories, Cruikshank notes that "different people tell different episodes in different order" (qtd. in Sidney, *Tagish Tlaagú* 90). Insofar as Sidney's story "How People Got Flint" is concerned, the linking of the three stories (the theft of the flint, the submersion of the rhubarb stalk and rock in the lake, and the actual storytelling event with the concluding conversation between the grandfather and grandchild) both complicates the stories and simplifies them in that very conjunctive process. While Bear's selfishness is obvious, additionally significant to the story is Bear's thick coat of winter fur and the fact that he had no need for the flint at all. This is especially underscored in Sidney's statement about

where Bear kept the flint: “They say Bear tied it under his tail where he had long hair under there” (74). Within this one sentence, Sidney emphasizes the mythic and ancient power and importance of the story (“They say . . .”), points out Bear’s possession of an entirely unnecessary object (“he had long hair”), and communicates Bear’s selfishness in a particularly graphic, scatological, and comic way (“Bear tied it under his tail”).

By immediately following her evocations of hard times with the comic description of Bear and his prized possession, Sidney balances out the seriousness with lightheartedness, the sadness with humor, and past times (people struggling without fire) with imagined events (Mouse stealing flint from under Bear’s tail). Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria) explain that such humor, especially depicted by clowns, “helps contrast imbalance and balance, order and disorder, in such a way that even a child can understand the basic concept of balance” (309). In the comic behavior of Mouse reaching under Bear’s tail to chew off the flint, we can only imagine the storyteller acting out that event as Mouse lifts up Bear’s tail, wrinkles his nose, makes a terrible face (as everyone laughs, imagining the smell), and then completes his onerous task.

Relational and Episodic Interconnections

This particular story is the first one that Cruikshank places, with Sidney’s approval, after the prose narrative section “Childhood.” Sidney agreed to the edited organization of the text with its episodic structuring created through the juxtaposition of the more traditional stories with the chronologically ordered personal stories. This episodic arrangement is also true of the other stories in *Life Lived Like a Story*. Indeed, the vast majority of Native stories produced by various contemporary and past ethnographers, and most contemporary literatures by Native writers, regardless of gender, are told within the episodic and associational formats of their respective tribal and familial oral storytelling traditions, in which the stories are interwoven with each other in a range of meaningful and deepening ways. Stories have their own range and depth of meanings accessible to the listener or listener-reader at different levels of understanding and from various perspectives. The meanings are not textually bound, but rather they arise through the interrelationships that develop between the storyteller, her (or his)

listeners, and the story. As I explain elsewhere, “This conjunction of diverse worlds and events (lived and imagined, past and present, historic and mythic) reflects the relational focus of storytelling, where the connections made between realities and domains are emphasized, and a more textual discursive privileging of separate events and subjectivities is deemphasized, if not altogether absent” (139). Part of the listener’s and storyteller’s *conversive* responsibilities include making and recognizing the interconnections between and among different stories—including the stories that the storyteller relates, other stories that the listener has been told and remembers, stories that the listener has actually lived, and the immediate story of the storytelling event. These interconnections can be seen in the important interrelationships among the traditional stories that Sidney chooses to relate in conjunction with stories from her life.

In “How People Got Flint,” very serious issues of life and death, human mortality and human spirituality, greed and selfishness, and generosity and caring are presented in the stories about Bear, Mouse, Fox, Grandpa, and his grandchild. Similarly, in her selection of stories that reflect back on her childhood, Sidney expressly relates these personal stories in ways that touch on the deeper issues of human existence in the world, including the real-world effects from the Euro-canadian colonization of the Yukon region. The other traditional stories in the “Stories from Childhood” section also center upon these themes, including human mortality and death (in a story about two old ladies who help care for the world), and lessons for children and parents in respecting each other (as in the little boy who criticizes his food or the mother who gives her son moldy fish to eat). The lessons in these stories provide the needed framework against which to approach Sidney’s own life stories. This is especially evident in the stories she chooses to include about her childhood—stories that also revolve around the themes of life, death, language, and naming, and what it is that peoples hold sacred.

The section entitled “Childhood” begins with Sidney’s birth and naming, and then turns to stories about her siblings (especially her beloved sister Dora who died as a young girl), tales of boarding school experiences, and other stories from those years that struck Sidney as sufficiently relevant to retell, including a traditional old lady story. It is also significant to note that, in choosing stories to share with her non-Native ethnographer and for a larger readership of Native and non-Native Yukoners and others (as Cruikshank has explained,

“Her conscious audience was always for folks in the Yukon” [June 24, 2000, letter]), it is telling that many of Sidney’s stories especially emphasize the colonialist relationships that developed with the arrival of Euroamericans and Eurocanadians in the Yukon and the inevitable consequences for the First Nations people who lived there. Instead of focusing on specific events that involved only her family and other Native peoples, Sidney selects stories that are more demographically inclusive, even if that inclusivity, at times, unveils the realities of a racial colonization whose effects endure into today. Perhaps these stories exemplify her acute awareness of her broader audience and her interest in educating diverse Yukoners (and others) about the truths of her times.

The Sacred Significance of Naming Amid the Disjunctive Discourse of Colonization

The very first story that Sidney shares about her early years centers on the presence of a white prospector mining near her family’s home. Shortly after her birth in January of 1902, the prospector George Dale came to her father’s house to escape the winter cold. When he was shown the little baby, Sidney relates that he said, “Oh, that baby looks so sweet. Just like a little angel. . . . Call her Angela” (*Life Lived* 66). This one story conveys volumes about the colonizing interactions between white and Native Canadians. In Sidney’s version of this story, George Dale, who had only just met her father, tells him what his daughter’s name should be, with apparently no consideration that the child might already have a name, either in the Indian way or the white way or both. Years later, when Sidney’s husband meets George Dale by chance, Dale informs him that he is Sidney’s godfather. The cultural divide is evident in the divergent ways that those involved see this history. After twenty years have passed, Dale recognizes Sidney’s maiden name and claims her as his godchild. In contrast, when her husband returns home and asserts that he has met her godfather, Sidney denies any knowledge of such a relationship. When she asks her mother about it, her mother tells her that when she was baptized, there was a “white man” present, presumably George Dale: “Somebody took you off my arm and held you. So it must have been George Dale. White man, anyway.” Whereas George Dale remembered his role in being named Sidney’s godfather, Sidney had never even been

told about his presence, and her mother has no recollection of George Dale other than that there was some white man present. Concluding her story about George Dale, Sidney ends by reiterating, “So he’s the one that gave me this name, Angela” (67). In Sidney’s case, her first name, Angela, connects us back to the days of the Klondike gold rush and its cataclysmic effects on the aboriginal peoples of that region. For Sidney, the discursive impact came early with a name “given” to her in infancy by a “white man” prospector. The enduring empowerment of converseive relationship within her close tribal community subsequently transformed that name into the referent by which she was known to those close to her: Auntie Angela.

This story gives us information about the origin of Sidney’s English name “Angela”; nevertheless, the specific factual information or details in stories is merely that—the superficial facticity of story texts. Stories (unlike texts) go far beyond the surface level of their narrative texts. The details in stories are there to provide the added keys that help our entries into and understandings of the stories’ meanings. Cruikshank explains, “Meaning does not inhere in events but involves weaving those events into stories that are meaningful at the time” (*Social Life* 2). Readers of orally informed stories need to be careful not to let the significance of the details overshadow the larger import of the overall story to which those facts are in service. If Sidney only wanted us to learn the origin of her first name, there would have been no need for her to relate that fact within the scope of a larger storytelling. She could have merely said, “A white prospector in the area saw me when I was a baby, and he gave me the name ‘Angela.’” However, Sidney chooses to relate this one event as a story. What remains for Sidney’s listener-reader is to read through the narrative text and begin to listen to the story that will emerge through the listener-reader’s engagement with Sidney’s words, intonations, and silences. In this fashion, the story of her name opens up into a far deeper story about the power of language, the importance of a person’s name, and the intrusive and lasting effects of outsiders upon Sidney’s family and world, and the efforts of Canadian First Nations people to transform the disempowering effects of that colonization, as best they could, into personal, familial, tribal, and community strengths.

In Sidney’s story, the white prospector comes to Sidney’s family home for food and shelter on a cold winter night. Sidney emphasizes that it was a *really* cold night: “It was a *cold*, cold night, he said” (*Life Lived* 66, emphasis in original). Perhaps this emphasis is to explain

the miner's visit to the Indian family, a visit the white man might not have made unless absolutely necessary. Whether his visit is explained only in terms of his need for warmth, his presence in Tagish John's (Sidney's father's) home is a presence that would not have been as readily reciprocated. It is unlikely that the Native peoples of Canada during the early part of the twentieth century (or even today, for that matter) would have been as welcomed into the homes of the white Eurocanadians as Mrs. Sidney's family and many other Native peoples have welcomed non-Native people into their homes. The tenuous relationship between George Dale and Tagish John's family is further underscored by Dale's total absence from the world of the family since his visit, with the apparently lone exception of his presence at Sidney's baptism when, as her mother recollects, a white man held the baby (67).

In Sidney's recounting, Dale goes to Tagish John's home assuming he will be welcomed and receive shelter from the cold. There he is shown their new baby. As a visitor accepting the family's gift of hearth, within a conversive relational framework, his acceptance of the family's gift would be considered a sign of his friendship. That Tagish John considers it such is evident in his desire to show the white miner the new baby—thereby bringing Dale further into the world of the family. Dale compliments the baby and then has the audacity to tell Tagish John what name he should give the baby and that he (Dale) should be her godfather "because I'm the first person she saw" (66). Presumably, Dale meant that he was the first *white* person, since clearly there were other *persons* in the home. Within a conversively aboriginal worldview, Tagish John's gifts to George Dale (shelter, acceptance of the baby's name, and the baptismal godfather role) would have been symbols concretizing their friendship. Furthermore, the ceremonial importance given to naming and the fact that Tagish John accepts Dale's wish and names his daughter Angela clearly show Tagish John's appreciation of Dale's "friendship" and his perception of their relationship as far more than a passing acquaintance. However, it appears that Dale neither understood this nor took his role in the baby's life seriously since Sidney had no memory of ever meeting him or even of having been told about him. Dale's connection to Sidney is largely discursive. For him, the words, the surface facts of the story, the text are what matter. Yet for Tagish John's family, Dale's lack of a lived and enduring reciprocity regarding the friendship makes him and the friendship unsubstantial and therefore unremembered. For them, the names, the words, the text must be grounded in reality with the

sort of relational connections in the world that make Dale's presence substantial to the family.

Sidney's story of her naming tells us about the colonialist prerogatives of the white settler community and the presumptions and behaviors that had real-world effects on the First Nations peoples in Canada. In contrast to Dale's view of naming in which a white man with a marginal connection to a Native child can decide the child's name, Sidney explains how sacred names are in her culture: "You've got to give kids a name as soon as they're born. Otherwise they get lost—their spirit gets lost—that's what they claim. I've got two names: *Stóow* for my grandmother—my mother's stepmother—and *Ch'óonehte' Má*" (*Life Lived* 67). Names given to children were traditionally names of other relatives within the same clan, emphasizing the connective links that helped to keep the community together: "The nations [clans] own the names. Indians don't allow different people to use their names" (*Haa Shagóon* xx). Sidney's comments about the weight given to naming within her culture contrast sharply with the presumptuous and colonial attitudes of a white man who tells an aboriginal couple what name they should give their daughter even though his relationship to the baby being named is marginal. The weight of this one story is further deepened by three subsequent stories that relate (1) the upheaval of the indigenous Yukon a century ago, such that Sidney never received the coming-of-age naming ceremony that was traditional for girls (a loss she felt deeply); (2) the deaths of her parents' first three children (which occurred a few years prior to Sidney's birth) from the diseases that the prospectors and other outsiders brought into the Yukon; and (3) the death of a beloved younger sister who dies in a missionary-run residential school and whose name is given to the next daughter who is born.

In the seemingly simple life-history narrative of Sidney's name, she communicates an intricately interwoven story that demonstrates her people's commitment to an applied spirituality that goes beyond the mere sentiment of Dale's claim of being her "godfather." The power of stories lies in their unifying effects as they bring persons together in community and individuals together in their integrating relationships with all of creation. In the colonizing disruptions of the Yukon, traditional sacred stories went untold and ceremonies omitted, perhaps even forgotten (as in the failure to have an aboriginal naming ceremony for Angela Sidney as a girl). Traditionally among First Nations peoples, gifts received and given were understood as

symbolic of developing relationships among people, and those gifts and relationships were to be honored with effort in continuance. As Sidney explained to Cruikshank, prior to the colonizing Euroamerican and Eurocanadian presence in the Yukon, even those relationships that were initiated during the early years of the fur trade were taken very seriously among the aboriginal men of various tribal groups: “In the trade in furs which took place in the last [the nineteenth] century, firm and lasting partnerships were established between coastal and interior men” (*Tagish Tlaagú* 99). Sidney emphasizes that the movements of peoples and families divided up communities while also creating new relational interweavings. In sharing the stories of her people’s moves and removes, she relates a meeting she had with people on the Alaskan coast. When she mentioned that she was from the interior, the coastal man replied, “Oh, my . . . My great-grandmother told me, ‘Two women went that way, inland. Two or three. They got married inland!’ Now I’m glad to meet you” (*Life Lived* 39). Through their sharing of mutual oral history stories, they confirmed for each other the historical fact of their interwoven stories, histories, and tribal and familial relations. As Sidney concludes, “I know now the truth that coast people are our relations”—with all the weight that the aboriginal concept of “relations” conveys (*ibid.*).

Storyed Life Lessons

A conversive storytelling approach to Angela Sidney’s stories is crucial to enable the reader to move beyond a more surface interpretive lens that would artificially divorce traditional mythic stories from personal life-history narratives, relegating each, respectively, to what would otherwise be perceived as the separate realms of the fictionally archetypal and the factually historical. Conversive engagements discover Sidney’s life-history stories to be factually true yet also symbolic and rich in meaning. Concomitantly, the traditional and mythic stories, while offering spiritual and moral lessons, also turn out to be historically, tribally, and personally significant. Relational and episodic meaning is evident throughout her stories. Sidney’s story about her first name relates actual historical information, and the story of Bear, Fox, and the Mouse people retells a traditional mythic story from her tribe; yet, when read together in a conversive manner, it becomes clear that the two stories are very much the same story of power differentials, coloni-

zation and its consequences, disjunctive intercultural communications, aboriginal people's struggles to survive, beliefs in life after death, and the moral, relational courage by which the people were taught to live.

Isolated from their tribal and historical contexts, the traditional stories lose their actual relevance to persons' lives in the world (e.g., those of their readers) and, thereby, take on the objectified and textualized forms of storied and mythic artifacts—interesting as evidence of an earlier and exotic “other” world and time, relevant as historical artifacts of interest to Sidney's descendants and fellow tribal members, but not immediately relevant to the lives of those of us distanced from their originating worlds by time, geography, and culture. Analogously, readings of Sidney's life-history stories, separated from their traditional storytelling frames, deprive the personal stories of their deeper, time immemorial meanings and their larger tribal and regional histories. As Cruikshank relates, “Gradually I learned how narratives about complex relationships between animals and humans, between young women and stars, between young men and animal helpers could frame not just larger, cosmological issues but also the social practices of women engaged with a rapidly globalizing world” (*Social Life* 46). The disjuncture of the mythic and sacred teaching stories from the everyday and historical events of Sidney's life attenuates all of the stories into mere traces of interpretive concept; what is needed is the everyday grounding and mythic deepening that together provide the meaningful anchors for both the traditional and life-history stories.

Angela Sidney's lifetime traversed cataclysmic changes in the lives of her family and fellow tribal members, and yet in her conversive storytelling, Sidney communicates much about the potential postcolonial “survivance” of First Nations people beyond their historical condition of Eurocanadian colonization (Vizenor 169). For Sidney, such personal and familial survivance is framed in spiritual terms that acknowledge and build on the past while focusing on the future of a changing world. As Cruikshank emphasizes, “A recurring theme in Mrs. Sidney's account is her preoccupation with evaluating and balancing old customs with new ideas” such that in her eighties (and in the 1980s), she sought “to reconcile orthodox [aboriginal] spiritual beliefs with a potpourri of religious ideas [Christian and Bahá'í] introduced to the Yukon during her lifetime” (*Life Lived* 23). By interweaving diverse manifestations of the sacred, Sidney brings them together within the rubric of one larger, world-embracing story. In his essay “The Politics of Knowledge,” Edward Said makes a poignant call for

just the sort of “worldliness” that Sidney achieves and demonstrates in her storytelling. As Said explains, “What I am talking about therefore is the opposite of separatism, and also the reverse of exclusivism” (28). Sidney does just this, what Vine Deloria (Lakota) advocates in his call for Native peoples to “be prepared to confront religion and religious activities in new and novel ways” (65).

Through her storytelling skill, Sidney is able to relate the history of her life and times with all the force and effect made possible in story. Readers who work to read beyond the text to access the symbolically rich stories will find a multiplicity of conversively informed meanings that are the true reward of conversive listening-reading.⁶ The range of stories in *Life Lived Like a Story* communicate far more than can even begin to be explicated in one essay, and ideally each reader as a listener-reader needs to plumb these stories’ interwoven depths for herself or himself. So doing, Sidney’s and the other women’s stories will become especially meaningful to each listener-reader as the stories come to life beyond the bounds of textual fixity and into a newly resurrected storytelling with each co-creative, conversive listening-reading response.

Without the day-to-day experiences of coming to know people and their worlds by actually living in those worlds, such relational engagements across time and place can be achieved in powerfully real and meaningful ways through story. Globally, people have been articulating the truths of their worlds since the beginning of human existence. Ignorance of the world’s diversity (spiritual and otherwise) is far less due to peoples’ silence and more due to the absence of listening ears and seeing eyes; textual distance and objectification disengage and disincline readers from a co-creative, close, and empathic listening to others’ stories. Sidney and Cruikshank provide a strong corrective to those “stories [that] are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world,” for, as Said reminds us, stories “also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (*Culture* xii).

The past several decades of feminist, cultural, postcolonial, and other postmodern criticisms have drawn our attention to the many stories of diverse humankind. Our responsibilities now remain to learn how to listen to stories conversively by means of those pathways that enable us to enter and become active coparticipants in the transforming, empowering, and healing stories of the world. This is why people have told stories from the beginning of time until today. In this wise woman’s tales, we will be able to hear Sidney’s diverse stories of

the sacred that permitted a traditional indigenous elder in the Yukon to express ancient sacred, tribal beliefs that affirmed her indigenous ancestry, her deeply lived connections to the sacred, and her commitment to a vision of global community. Notwithstanding a lifetime of unimaginable loss, turmoil, and suffering at the hands of the colonial powers of church and state, Sidney maintained a firm grasp of the crucial role that storytelling has played and continues to play in the health, integrity, and balance in people's lives. Her gift to us is her storytelling; our responsibilities are to receive her gifts with attuned conversive ears. "Well," she concluded one afternoon, "I have no money to leave to my grandchildren. My stories are my wealth" (*Life Lived* 36). As Sidney says, "Well, I've tried to live my life right, just like a story" (*ibid.* 20).

Notes

1. Far more serious is the extent to which Christian missionary work in Indian country has overtly been part of colonizing ideologies and agendas. George Tinker writes that "Christian missionaries . . . were partners in genocide," noting their "complicity in the destruction of Indian cultures and tribal social structures—complicity in the devastating impoverishment and death of the people to whom they preached" (4). Jace Weaver makes even more explicit the culpability of missionaries in the destruction of tribal cultures: "Missionaries, in their colonialist drive to assimilate Natives, told those they converted that to become Christian meant to stop being Indian" (*Religious Identity* 5; also *Other Words* 285). The colonialist devaluation of indigenous sacred practices, on behalf of both church and state, forced many tribes to take their tribal ceremonies underground for extended periods of time until those practices, discouraged or outlawed, were openly permitted by their colonizing governments. Maintaining the integrity and freedom of tribal sacred practice has been an ongoing struggle throughout the past and continuing colonization of Native peoples by the various European, Euroamerican, and Eurocanadian nations. This being said, it must be noted that the various European nations colonizing North America were not uniformly disparaging of indigenous culture. Included in Michael Oleska's *Alaskan Missionary Spirituality* is an early Russian letter from Orthodox bishop Petr that recognizes parallels between the traditional stories of the Alaskan Natives and many stories in the Bible. Perhaps even more significant in his 1894 letter is his affirmation of the divine origins of traditional indigenous belief: "It must be noted in accordance with God's Holy Revelations the Aleuts and the Kadiaks [*sic*] were not completely bereft of God's Grace, as a result of which there remained with them a sense of morality which prevented them from falling into ultimate sin" (71). This level of respect for indigenous spirituality represents one of the few exceptions among the majority of Christian missionization efforts toward Native populations where the embrace of Christianity invariably was intertwined with a devaluation of tribal culture.

2. Elaine J. Lawless advocates a changing “role of the ethnographer in the wave of thinking about a ‘new ethnography’” to the extent of rejecting “the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar’s position as more legitimate because it is the more educated or more credible one” (302, 312). Recently, some anthropologists have begun to take conversive approaches in their own work, providing new models of relational, collaborative, and intersubjective fieldwork—what Judith Okely has described as “lived interactions, participatory experience and embodied knowledge” (“Participatory Experience” 3). The process of transforming stories into constructed texts varies from text to text, editor to editor, and storyteller to storyteller. As James Clifford writes, “Whether brought by missionary, trader, or ethnographer, writing is both empowering (a necessary, effective way of storing and manipulating knowledge) and corrupting (a loss of immediacy, of the face-to-face communication Socrates cherished, of the presence and intimacy of speech)” (“On Ethnographic Allegory” 118). Paul de Man explains such a contradiction in relation to autobiographical works: “any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical. But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be” (922). In relation to ethnographically informed Native American autobiographies, we can either read the ethnographic text as a discursively constructed text that yields information and fact about the “informant’s” life and times, or we can become conversive listener-readers working to listen to the underlying stories that offer a deeper realm of meaning and symbolism.

3. In this collection, Cruikshank works co-creatively with the three Native women elders, enabling them to speak their highly skilled storytelling craft through the mediative layers of the text. Although this volume is technically a work of ethnographic collaboration, it is also a collection of the Native women’s creative storytelling that combines tribal myth and belief system, colonial history and its consequents, and the women’s own craft. As such, this volume contrasts from “much of the early construction of published American Indian autobiographies [that] went through a linguistically and ideologically interpretive process that transformed conversive tellings into discursive texts that, more often than not, diverge substantially from their storied beginnings and instead present the ideologies, language, and discursive forms of the colonizing power of the academy” (Brill de Ramírez, *Native American Life-History Narratives* x).

4. From without, we can point to the various semiotic significances displayed in the textual narratives; also from an outside, albeit relational, reader-response approach, the reader can bring the world of the text into his or her interpretive life; a dialogic reading enables reader access to the (often op)positionally presented voices in an apparently heteroglossic and logocentric text; and hermeneutics illuminates the various meanings of the text as understood through the reader’s own orientation to that text (Brill de Ramírez 6–7, 129–54).

5. Revisionist scholars, like Judith Okely and Johannes Fabian, have argued rightly against the imperialism and objectification inherent in anthropological fieldwork. Fabian asserts, “field research is fundamentally confrontational and only superficially observational. To acknowledge that Self and Other are inextricably involved in a dialectical process will make anthropology not less but more realistic” (20). In the same vein, Okely writes, “The field worker, as opposed to

those who analyse other peoples' material, has a peculiarly individualistic and personal confrontation with 'living' data" ("Self" 171). As long as the fieldwork orientation follows a discursively constructed format, the communications process will be varyingly dialectical and dialogic with the inherent (op)positional stances present among all involved. However, a conversively informed set of relationships that are established among the fieldworker and all others involved definitionally avoids the confrontational situation that Okely and Fabian warn us about. Julie Cruikshank's work with three Native women elders in the Yukon stands out as a model for such work. Cruikshank was devoted to ensuring the primacy of the women's voices and stories while at the same time providing sufficient additional background information to enable non-Native and non-Yukon readers access into and understanding of the women's stories.

6. As Stephen A. Tyler explains regarding the diverse communication patterns manifested by orally told stories and their textualized versions, "Orality makes us think of many voices telling many tales in many tongues, in contrast to the inherent monologism of texts that only tell different versions of the one true tale" (136). Further, Clifford emphasizes that "experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic processes are at work, discordantly, in any ethnography" ("On Ethnographic Authority" 142).

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CHAPTER 11



“Soul Murder” and Rebirth

*Trauma, Narrative, and Imagination
in Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Cereus Blooms at Night, by Caribbean Canadian novelist Shani Mootoo, begins with a grim picture of its central female figure, the elderly Mala Ramchandin. Drugged and bound to a stretcher, the terrified woman is carried into an institution for the aged and left to face prosecution for the murder of her father. After years of suffering incestuous childhood abuse, followed by the ostracism of her community, she has spent the greater part of her life locked within the confines of her own mind, repeatedly reliving the traumatic moments of her mother’s abandonment and her father’s violent sexual assault. As the novel opens, her life seems about to conclude as it had been lived, in one more repetition of an unrelenting cycle of paralysis, madness, and pain.

Since its publication ten years ago, Mootoo’s novel has attracted considerable critical attention, most of it concentrating on the text’s place within the postcolonial tradition of Caribbean writers. Focusing particular attention on the symbol of the garden, these critics have explored the novel’s treatment of sexual and racial hybridity and its deconstruction of the “identity categories of race, sexuality, and nation” (Howells 151).¹ While such approaches highlight an essential aspect of Mootoo’s novel, they unwittingly elide the incestuous sexual violation that lies at the center of the novel. To characterize the abuse

euphemistically, as "an expression of the unspeakable excess of the border-crossing that victimized Mala" (Hoving 158), or to treat it briefly as a consequence of "the psychological legacy of colonialism" (Howells 154), unintentionally reinforces the silence and discomfort surrounding disclosures of incestuous abuse and reveals the extent to which society still wishes to believe "that the universal incest taboo is universally preserved" (Frawley-O'Dea 183).² Herself a survivor of childhood sexual assault, Mootoo has discussed her own silencing by her grandmother and the release that finally putting words to her experiences has brought her.³ Such approaches also ignore the specific and disturbing detail with which Mootoo portrays Mala's personal experiencing of the incest—she attempts both to convey the singularity of the abuse and yet to destabilize her readers through the "empathic unsettlement" described by historian and trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra.⁴ Interpreting the abuse almost wholly within the larger context of the consequences of colonialism, as Arundhati Roy argues in *The God of Small Things*, "cauterizes" or discounts the pain of the individual, perpetuating the sense that, in the face of collective historical trauma, "personal despair c[an] never be desperate enough" (20). But as Roy's novel indicates, it is the recognition of personal histories of trauma, loss, and pain that counters the metanarrative of colonialism and insists that individual lives and individual suffering matter.

In her graphic depiction of Mala's extreme physical and psychological trauma, Mootoo sets out the violation of the intimacy, trust, and dependency that lie at the heart of interhuman relationships and challenges her readers with a series of almost irresolvable problems. Is it possible for her protagonist, an elderly woman so paralyzed by her fear of human interaction that she gradually loses the ability to speak, to regain the ability to love others? If she has no cognitive distance from her memories but is, instead, inhabited by their violence and pain, then how is she ever to alter her response to her past: to reinterpret it creatively, rather than engage in endless reenactments? In attempting to devise a novel that allows for the possibility of redemption and grace while acknowledging the irrecoverable losses of the past, Mootoo also raises difficult ethical and moral issues for both herself and her readers. How is she to construct a narrative that testifies to the continuing presence of love and compassion in the world without trivializing the extent of Mala's suffering? In what ways should she, as a writer, represent Mala's trauma, and in what ways are we, as readers, supposed to respond?

Literary scholars, psychoanalysts, and historians have engaged in an extensive debate over the nature of traumatic experience, considering the ways in which survivors may attempt to recover, articulate, and integrate their memories into a narrative, as well as the ethical and moral dilemmas involved in such a recounting. Some contend that both autobiographical and fictional accounts of trauma provide a valuable means by which an individual or a group may work through traumatic memories and incorporate them into a personal or collective narrative that restores meaning and a sense of agency.⁵ Others argue that representations of trauma should recognize that such an experience can never be truly captured in language or shared with or communicated to another.⁶ Attempts to master or narrate traumatic experience, they contend, lead to an objectification of the past that trivializes the survivor's suffering. Different approaches have attempted to balance or negotiate between these extremes. In particular, scholars have criticized the glorification of trauma as an experience that challenges the bounds of language because, they argue, such a formulation condemns the sufferer, whether fictional or living, to a repeated reliving of the experience, often to the point of madness. The balance to be striven for, they stress, is to contain the trauma within a narrative while continuing to commemorate the irrecoverable losses of the past and to respect the often incomprehensible suffering of the victims.⁷

While these scholars place different emphasis on the ways in which trauma may be conceptualized, understood, and even defined, studies of childhood sexual abuse, particularly those that adopt an approach based on either relational psychoanalysis or object relations theory, have tended to focus their attention on the wider interpersonal context in which the abuse occurs and to consider the interplay between intrapsychic and interpersonal factors in understanding, articulating, and coming to terms with the experience. Childhood incest trauma, Gilead Nachmani argues, arises out of a failure of intersubjective relations. Thus, rather than focusing exclusively on the inadequacy of language in conveying an entirely unexpected and overwhelming experience, Nachmani emphasizes: "Traumas . . . are relational processes that facilitate multiple outrageous events" (195). They occur, he argues, because of the systematic denial of the selfhood and the voice of the other, which then prepares the ground for the actual abuse as well as the continued silencing of the victim, who becomes entrapped within her or his abuser's world and denied both an inner and an outer space from which to challenge the violence done to her or him. The

victim is silenced not only because the traumatic experience cannot be conceptualized but also because of the familial, social, and cultural circumstances surrounding the abuse, as well as the damage done to the individual's sense of self. Because the incest violates the child's closest ties, damaging her or his faith in those upon whom she or he is dependent, it undermines the trust and love needed to establish a child's sense of human connectedness and the belief that her or his experiences can be shared with others in a mutually meaningful way. In identifying with the aggressor in order to survive, the individual also has no sense of self free from the inner presence of her or his abuser and loses the ability to listen to and acknowledge her or his pain.⁸

In his work with trauma patients, Sándor Ferenczi, a close colleague and friend of Sigmund Freud, was one of the first psychoanalysts to explore the interplay between intrapsychic and interpersonal factors in recounting and coming to terms with childhood sexual trauma.⁹ Sometimes controversially, he stresses the importance of the loving and nurturing support provided by the listener or analyst.¹⁰ Reflecting upon one of his patients, he underlines the contrast between her past and present experiencing of the trauma. In the past, there was "total isolation instead of the possibility of telling her troubles and of being listened to sympathetically" (*Clinical Diary* 27). By contrast, the therapeutic situation re-creates the past experience, but with someone else present to help and comfort: "Being alone leads to splitting. The presence of someone with whom one can share and communicate joy and sorrow (love and understanding) can HEAL the trauma" (*ibid.* 201). The individual then, he emphasizes, is healed not so much by gaining intellectual insight and understanding into her past, as Freud argues, but by reliving it, in the reenactment, differently.¹¹ There is an inner shift in the way in which the person views herself and her world, occasioned by the exchange between the therapist and her client.

It is this potential to reexperience the trauma of the past differently because of the love and restorative care of another, and because of changed interpersonal relationships in the present, that Mootoo explores in her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Her elderly protagonist, Mala, begins the novel disconnected from both herself and her community, stripped of her faith in the capacity of language to allow her to communicate with herself, with others, and with the divine. Not only is she silenced by society, which comes to blame and ridicule her for the incest; she also loses the ability to speak to and listen to herself. But while Mootoo sets out the ways in which her father's incestuous

sexual abuse has consumed the body, as well as the life and spirit, of Mala, enacting the “soul murder” described by researcher Leonard Shengold,¹² she also recognizes the transforming capacity of love and compassion in human relationships.

Befriended by Tyler, a nurse at the Paradise Alms House, Mala begins a gradual journey out of the violence and pain of her past, a journey traced in both the inner and the frame narratives of the novel. But her history, which Tyler gradually recovers in the outer narrative and shares with readers in the inner narrative, avoids trivializing her suffering or minimizing the terrible extent of her losses. Instead, *Mootoo* crafts a multilayered novel that deals with trauma and recovery in terms of human interdependency, responsibility, and love, and that compels readers to rethink their own response to the suffering of others. Through Tyler’s guidance, she invites readers both to contemplate and to undertake that which Emmanuel Levinas terms “the most profound adventure of subjectivity” (“Useless Suffering” 99): the opening or exposure of the self to the other’s “suffering—extreme passivity, helplessness, abandonment, and solitude—. . . the original call for aid” (*ibid.* 93). But, unlike Levinas, *Mootoo* offers a perspective upon human interrelatedness that explores not only the asymmetrical gift of love by self to other but also the beauty of mutuality and reciprocity in intersubjective relationships. In doing so, *Mootoo* strives to avoid turning Mala’s story into “an edifying discourse . . . [or] preachment” (*ibid.* 99) that would objectify the woman’s past and turn her suffering into a moral example meant to teach readers, yet she also reveals the importance of recognition and mutuality in the sharing and narration of traumatic experiences. Tyler’s highly self-conscious reflections upon his role in uncovering and narrating Mala’s history then allow *Mootoo* to warn against the possible appropriation of victims’ experiences and attempt to suggest the ways in which her readers may respond to the helplessness of another, while respecting her or his difference from themselves.

In his essay “Useless Suffering,” Levinas acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining faith in a century of slaughter and genocide. One should not try to rationalize another’s suffering or make it appear useful in any way, he stresses; what he terms “the bad and gratuitous meaninglessness of pain” manifests itself in both human oppression and natural disaster: “The arbitrariness and strange failure of justice amidst wars, crimes, and the oppression of the weak by the strong, rejoin, in a sort of fatality, the useless suffering that springs from natural plagues” (95).

To try to claim that such suffering is justified as a part of God's plan or a way to atone for our sins is to place "in a suffering that is essentially gratuitous and absurd, and apparently arbitrary, a meaning and order" (96). And yet, he argues, the individual must also resist what he terms the truly diabolical: the loss of faith occasioned by immeasurable or incomprehensible suffering and the accompanying indifference that would "abandon the world to useless suffering, leaving it to the political fatality—or drifting—of blind forces that inflict misfortune on the weak and conquered" (99).

If, Levinas contends, we are neither to justify suffering as a part of God's plan nor to surrender to indifference or apathy, then the very senselessness of suffering "demands even more from the resources of the *I* in each one of us" (100). The helplessness and isolation of the sufferer, he insists, who can neither escape from her pain unaided nor give it a divine purpose, call out for the assistance of a fellow human being; this extreme need gives rise to an expression of the spiritual that reveals itself solely through interhuman relationships and the self's response to the "passivity, helplessness, abandonment, and solitude" of the other, "the original call for aid, for curative help" (93). As Samuel Moyn explains, "instead of discovering ethics from divine revelation, Levinas' ethics involve the 'deduction' of God from human revelation" (256). Levinas, he contends, shifts a "relationship based on a response to the love of God to an interpersonal encounter between human self and human other" (150). The "face of the other" compels the self "to goodness and responsibility" (Perpich 45), and the transcendent, divine other is internalized "to the human realm in the form of the human other" (Moyn 229). Thus, "the consciousness," Levinas argues, "of this inescapable obligation [to attend to the suffering of the other, rather than depend on the intercession of an all-powerful God] brings us close to God in a more difficult, but also a more spiritual, way than does confidence in any kind of theodicy" (94).

In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Tyler's asymmetrical gift of love, offered to the crazed, voiceless woman tied by leather straps to her bed, reveals a commitment to the spiritual similar to that outlined by Levinas, a commitment that expresses itself solely through interhuman relationships and the self's response to the need and abandonment of the other. The brutal and repeated incestuous abuse of Mala, or Pohpoh, as she is nicknamed as a child, denies the girl's physical and psychological integrity and represents the most extreme example of a human being's refusal to acknowledge both the autonomy and the

dependence of the other. Even more damaging, the trauma leaves her entrapped within an ongoing cycle of abuse and victimization. Just as Levinas's essay identifies helplessness and isolation as the defining qualities of suffering and explains that the individual is irrevocably confined within the boundaries of her or his own pain, with no ability to move beyond it or outside it without the assistance of another, so, too, Mootoo indicates that Mala is locked within the confines of her past trauma. This paralysis is particularly well suggested by an early moment in the novel, when the child Pohpoh encloses an ant within a circle of chalk. At first it strives desperately to escape, but eventually it accepts its imprisonment, remaining motionless while the other ants carefully ignore both prison and prisoner: "The ants outside the circle marched up to the chalk line and one after the other backed off, refusing to cross. The ant trapped in the circle ran around the inside of the circle, frantically changing course, standing on its hind legs and then crouching on the ground in panic. Outside the circle several ants dropped their leaves and scurried back in the direction they came. Within seconds a new path bypassing the circle had been created, and the ants outside it hesitantly resumed their trek, more cautiously than ever before. The ant in the circle stood completely still" (95). The ant's abandonment by its fellows captures perfectly the reality of Pohpoh's own situation. As she ages, her isolation increases until she refuses to step outside the fence that surrounds her property: the boundaries that she marks off with snail shells, described as being as white as chalk, set out the external limitations of her world as well as represent the inner circle that her traumatic experiences have engraved inside her mind.¹³

But in responding to rather than violating Mala's helplessness and dependent vulnerability, Tyler resists the loss of faith and love occasioned by her father's actions. He opens himself to the spiritual, or the face of the other, by recognizing Mala's forsaken helplessness and seeing it as a call directed toward his compassion. Rather than attempting to explain her pain by seeing it as a deserved punishment, or casting it as a part of God's inscrutable plan, a tribulation to be rewarded in the afterlife (Levinas, "Useless Suffering" 96), Tyler listens to and answers the need of the insane woman whom society has abandoned—first to the abuse of her father and then to the ridicule of her community.

Mala also displays a similar capacity for selfless love and compassion, Tyler's inner narrative makes clear; her refusal to be indifferent to the suffering of others, whether human or nonhuman, allows her to preserve the most essential part of herself, her responsibility "for-

the-other'" (Levinas, "Uniqueness" 194). The demand, Levinas argues, that others' suffering places upon us is the means by which we realize our "non-interchangeability"; our uniqueness is confirmed through our "nontransferable and unimpeachable responsibility" in the face of the exposed vulnerability of the other (ibid. 248). Mala's willingness to mother her younger sister Asha and ignore her own needs allows her, despite the disintegration of self caused by the senseless violation inflicted upon her, to retain the potential to give and receive love.

While Mootoo underlines the redemptive nature of both Mala's and Tyler's responsibility "for-the-other" and suggests, as Levinas argues, that these asymmetrical gifts of love help them retain or confirm their subjectivity, Mootoo also explores the restorative qualities of mutuality and reciprocity in human relationships.¹⁴ Mala's repeated question, "Where Asha?" which is, at first, the only phrase she will speak in the almshouse, serves as a symbolic reminder of her selfless sacrifice for her sister and her continuing capacity to love and care for another. However, the question, directed at Tyler and repeated to the reader, also signifies the growing reciprocity between Tyler and Mala and the necessity of having others recognize Mala's self-sacrifice. Similarly, Tyler emphasizes mutuality and reciprocity in the relationships that he constructs with both Mala and the readers whom he directly addresses, and he underlines the importance of a two-way exchange between self and other.

When Mala first arrives at the charity home, Tyler literally and symbolically acts as her mother, initiating the psychological rebirth and rediscovery of love that will follow. While Mala had earlier alternated between a state of complete alienation from others to one of catastrophic engulfment by them, Tyler's touch, which recognizes her on a nonverbal level, helps reestablish her capacity to feel both connected to and yet separate from others. In her response to Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, Luce Irigaray emphasizes the primacy of touch in inter-human relationships, whether between mother and child or between lovers: "Before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence. No nourishment can compensate for the grace or work of touching. Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress and reshape, from within and from without, a flesh that is given back to itself in the gesture of love. . . . The other's hands, those palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and call me to the remembrance of the most profound intimacy" (121). Similarly, Tyler's touch helps

restore Mala's sense of the boundaries of her own body and the possibility of a loving and intimate connection with others. Through his gentle caress of the hair on her forehead, Tyler attempts to reassure her on a physical level: "I wanted her to feel in my touch that I would not harm her" (16–17). He also uses his physical presence and contact to comfort her in the first night she spends at the almshouse: "I sat by her head, slipped my arm under her back and pulled her into my arms. I held her against my chest, rocking her until the first streaks of morning light broke through the pitch-black sky" (22). Later, he spends long hours holding the terrified old woman in his arms; he hand-feeds her; and he washes, dresses, and talks to her. Most important, his touch allows him both to recognize her as a person, separate from himself and more than the rumors that seek to define her, and yet able to be touched—that is, both physically and emotionally connected to or empathized with. When he first strokes her hair, "this one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving" (11).

If Tyler's love informs the physical touch that restores Mala to a sense of the boundaries of her own body, it also reveals itself in the touch of his imagination. His imaginative empathy allows him to touch Mala not just physically, in the present, but also in the past, through the cocreation of a personal history that allows Mala both to expose herself to others and yet to mark herself off as separate from them. As her trust in Tyler grows, Mala gradually begins to recover language, signaling her reentry into the human world that had excluded her. Tyler's interest in recording and understanding her story, and his willingness to act as the witness of her suffering, encourage Mala to uncover herself further. Tyler relates: "When she saw me awaiting her next word and writing it down as soon as she uttered it, she drew nearer. I soon got the impression that she actually began to whisper in my direction, that I had become her witness. She spoke rapidly and with great urgency, in a low monotone, repeating herself, sometimes for hours without end. . . . It became apparent that the question 'Where Asha?'—usually asked without emotion or nuance—was not idle rambling. There was a purpose to it and to all the chatter, and finally a purpose to my listening and to sifting, cutting, and sewing the lot" (107). When he pieces together Mala's narrative from its rambling, repetitious fragments, his assistance helps make her whole: he brings together the shattered pieces of her life into a unity in which her past, in being clearly marked off from her present, will no longer

possess her, holding her paralyzed in its unforgiving grasp. Thus Tyler's touch reveals itself in both physical and creative terms and manifests what Irigaray terms the "fecundity of a love" that lies in an "infinity of empathy with the other [and] . . . whose most elementary gesture, or deed, remains the caress" (120). Initiating and fulfilling the "call to birth of the self and other" (ibid. 120), Tyler's imaginative fecundity aids Mala in reestablishing the physical boundaries of her body and embarking on relationships built on mutuality and reciprocity. It also gives birth to the story that the two build together and enables and unfolds the gradual shift in Mala's response to her traumatic memories.

In particular, the complex interplay between inner and outer narratives allows Mootoo to envision the increasingly dynamic exchange between Mala's inner, or intrapsychic, world, which is locked in the events of the past, and her interpersonal relationships in the present. Her outer, first-person narrative follows Tyler in the present, as he gradually gains Mala's trust and establishes an intimate relationship with the terrified, apparently insane old woman. After undergoing three separate experiences of abandonment, first by her mother, then by her beloved younger sister, and finally by her lover Ambrose, Mala has become locked within her mind, enduring the endless repetition of the moments when she was left, alone, to face her father's violent rage.¹⁵ Tyler's inner narrative, a third-person account, weaves together his imaginative re-creation of the memories that Mala later confides to him with the information about her past that he obtains from other sources. This account is further split into the stories he reconstructs of Mala's adult past and of her childhood.

By closely intertwining the inner and outer narratives, Mootoo suggests that Tyler's response to Mala's physical needs, her fear, and her desperation resonates through the inner layers of her self, unfolded in the different levels of the novel. Reverberating back into the past, Tyler's love and care not only aid the elderly Mala in the nursing home but also reach back to the woman whose adult life was destroyed by insanity and even to her despised child self, the little girl nicknamed Pohpoh. While the events of the past cannot be altered, Mootoo sets out the different ways in which they can be reexperienced and reinterpreted, ways closely dependent on and influenced by people in the present.

The dynamic interaction between inner and outer narratives also allows the creation of a potential space that brings the terrible fixity

of Mala's past into contact with the limitless possibility of fantasy, creativity, and love. In an essay on overcoming the effects of childhood trauma, Evelyn Pye emphasizes the role that imagination and fantasy play in transforming individuals' personal histories. Traumatic experience, Pye argues, disables the imagination, because it renders a person completely helpless in the face of her environment (179). When the survivor later recalls her memories, her original sense of powerlessness may continue to control the way in which she remembers and experiences the past; she feels possessed by her own memories. Thus Pye emphasizes the importance of being able to shift from one understanding of self, in which the "individual experiences him—or herself as the victim of incommensurable forces including his or her own memories, fantasies, emotions, and body," to a second, in which "the individual is a subject with a history who can reflect on his or her memories and fantasies and who . . . [is] able to enter potential space and the full humanity of [her or his] imagination" (181). Tyler's love for and assistance to Mala, revealed in the frame narrative of the present, help her reestablish the boundaries between her inner world and her external environment and separate past traumatic memories from present experience. In the potential space that opens up for her, Mala is able to liberate her imagination from its paralyzed entrapment within the repetitive playing out of her memories and to begin to alter her inner experiencing and interpretation of her past.¹⁶

In his accounts of the earliest parts of her life, Tyler reveals the devastating progress of Mala's alienation from herself, as well as from the support and assistance of her community. Repeatedly traumatized, she gradually loses the capacity to be "an authentic witness to [her]self" and comes, as well, to accept her isolation from the rest of humanity and "the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness" (Felman and Laub 68). As a child Pohpoh learns to dissociate her anger against her father. In a rare outburst, she whispers to her sister, "I wish Papa was dead. . . . I hate him. I hate him. I wish he was dead" (96), but for the most part she comes to disown her own sensory experiences and emotions and to treat her body as an object separate from herself. She also silences the vulnerable, loving part of herself that is most wounded by the abuse and refuses to hear its need, its longing for nurturance and protection. Her intrapsychic world gradually replicates the indifferent response of her community: mimicking the stony silence of the external world that abandons her to her father's

assault, she turns "stone-blank eyes" (153) on her inner self's anguish and rage and goes into her father's bedroom, "as if it were nothing at all" (72). In thus denying her own pain and suppressing "the temptation to indulge in yearning—yearning to have her mother back next to her, to feel her mother hugging her" (153), she protects herself by "squeezing the entire psychic life out of the inhumanly suffering body" (Ferenczi, *Clinical Diary* 9). Such fragmentation and denial allow her to survive but create a body without a spirit; she becomes what Ferenczi describes as "a body progressively divested of its soul, whose disintegration is not perceived at all or is regarded as an event happening to another person, being watched from the outside" (ibid. 9). Ferenczi's words also help explain the nature of the prison in which Mala finds herself increasingly confined: her necessary detachment from her own pain leaves her unable to describe the violation done to her, but in leaving her abuse unspoken, "as if it were nothing at all," she helplessly acquiesces to her own objectification and accepts that her pain has no significance. Identifying with her victimizer, Mala, like many abuse victims, "has no credible text, no witnesses, no capacity to bear witness" (Nachmani 204).

Mala's growing distance from herself, and from her deep need to trust, nurture, and love others, culminates in the moment when she murders her father. While the child Pohpoh had been gentle and compassionate, trying to protect both her sister and animals from wanton human cruelty, the adult Mala becomes an external embodiment of her father's self-hate and destructiveness. Filled with the feelings of fury and ineffective powerlessness that he has emptied into her, she is transformed into someone whom even her lover barely knows, "an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face, frothing at the mouth and hacking uncontrollably at the furniture in the drawing room" (246). She kills her father in a rage so violent that she finishes her attack by banging a door, over and over, against his head.

The decades of insanity that follow this murder complete Mala's silencing, for she becomes unable to listen to herself or to trust that others may listen to her. Living as a recluse in her family house, she repeats each year the moments of her abandonment, and each year she reconfirms the way in which language fails to enable her to express her own pain or to address an other, whether human or divine. When her memories return at the advent of each rainy season, she cries "out the only words she had spoken in ages" and pleads, "Oh God. I beg you. Please. Doh leave me, I beg you, oh God, oh God, doh leave me, I beg-

gin you. Take me with you" (143). But the only response to her anguish is an eerie emptiness that underlines her isolation, a silence in which her pain is neither comforted nor ridiculed but simply not recognized, as though it were felt in a void in which it had no meaning or purpose. Redirecting her psychic agony into a more manageable form of physical pain, Mala fills her mouth with a specially prepared hot pepper sauce, in a deliberate ritual that burns her tongue until it becomes "so blistered that parts of the top layer had already disintegrated and other areas had curled back like rose petals dipped in acid" (143). She is able to survive the inner agony caused by her feelings of loss, but only at the cost of once again disowning the part of herself that seeks to have her suffering recognized. Thus, each time that she attempts to speak and is left unanswered by the rest of the world, Mala is confirmed in her sense that her pain cannot be conveyed to others, that it is too terrible even to be acknowledged to herself. With each reenactment of her experience of assault and abandonment, she more deeply engraves the circle that confines her within her own mind.

In the last of Mala's experiences of abandonment, however, Tyler's physical presence in the outer narrative, paralleled by his imaginative presence in the inner narrative, means that the elderly woman is no longer left unaided and alone. As Tyler reconstructs the final events that lead to Mala's removal from her house and her forcible incarceration in the Paradise Alms House, his narrative at first reinforces the sense in which the old woman is still entrapped within a continuing cycle of humiliation, degradation, and rejection, a cycle that plays itself out in both her intrapsychic and interpersonal worlds. Accosted by police who have come to investigate the discovery of a corpse in her house—the body of her murdered father—the elderly woman retreats inside a memory in which the child Pohpoh returns from a lonely nighttime adventure after being sexually assaulted. Just as the ongoing events in her adult life mirror the victimization of her childhood, her inward experiencing of them is the same: collapsing present into past, she is at once both the abused child, cast out from her community, and the ostracized old woman, ridiculed by the police.

But, as Tyler continues, his inner narrative begins to show the way in which Mala's interpretation of the past is being influenced by the circumstances of the present. The events of the frame narrative, in which Tyler's love has helped her reestablish the boundaries of her body and mark off the separation between her inner self and the external world, as well as that between self and other, open up the creative potential

space in which she is no longer frozen within a repetition of the events of the past. In this space, she is able not only to speak the events of the past to another but, more importantly, to reexperience them and reinterpret them differently in the present. For the first time, even if only in her memories and imagination, the elderly Mala is able to protect her child self, to, as she had wished, "go back in time and be a friend to this Pohpoh" (153). She waits, "decid[ing] that if trouble was indeed on its way her first duty was to save and care for Pohpoh" (185). The collapsing of the present into the past and the intrusion of the past into the present become even more pronounced as Tyler continues. In order to capture the fragmented "co-conscious mental operations" (Reis 221) characteristic of trauma survivors, his narrative shifts, with an often dizzying rapidity, between the experiences of the child Pohpoh standing in the garden and those of the old woman being interrogated by the police. In a climactic moment, Tyler tells us that Pohpoh manages to remember the abuse she usually dissociates: the sight of Pohpoh's "paunchy" father "was unprying her memory. She was reminded of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget: her legs being ripped apart, something entering her from down there, entering and then scooping her insides out." But, simultaneously, the elderly "Mala remembered. She heard the voices of the police. She reconfigured what they said to match her story of how she saved Pohpoh that day" (188).

As Tyler's retelling continues, Pohpoh is almost overwhelmed by the fear and pain that her memories of abuse trigger; however, as she struggles to regain the customary state of stony imperviousness that has always protected her, she realizes that "this time there was a difference. Pohpoh felt, for once, that she was not alone" (189). Tyler's love, enfolding Mala in the outer narrative and embodied in his physical touch, allows Mala, in a similar way, to touch the vulnerable part of herself that she had dissociated and to accompany and care for her previously despised child self. As Tyler has been her mother, holding, cherishing, and loving her, she gains the power, in revisiting the past, to hug "the taut, stiff child" and offer her words of comfort. She tells Pohpoh, "Things bad at home, child? I understand. I understand everything. *Everything*. Today is the last day that anybody will ever be able to reach you" (199). In Tyler's reenvisioning of Mala's past, the traumatic reenactments that had tormented Mala her whole life become a means for her to enter the past and provide a previously denied comfort to the part of herself still locked within the inner space in which she repeats

the experience of the abuse. But she is able to do so because Tyler's love for her in the frame narrative also accompanies her and provides the changed interpersonal relationship that helps her experience the inner reliving of her past differently. The assistance on the part of Tyler, as Ferenczi and Michael Balint theorize in their discussions of the interaction between analyst and analysand, allows Mala's whole intrapsychic world to shift. She accepts rather than denies Pohpoh's vulnerability and need for love, and in becoming reunited with this lost but valued aspect of her self, she "reconstitutes the internal 'thou,' and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside [her]self" (Felman and Laub 85). In turn, her restored capacity to listen to herself and accept the anguish she had previously dissociated reflects and reinforces her reestablishment of relationships with external others, first Tyler and then Ambrose, her girlhood lover.

The final image in this section of Tyler's inner narrative underlines the way in which Mala has been liberated from her enmeshment within a paralyzing repetition of the past and suggests the as yet undiscovered future of possibility and freedom opening up before both her and Tyler. Early in the novel, Pohpoh longs to escape her father's abuse and the increasingly constrictive confines of her inner and outer world by transforming herself into "a frigate bird soaring with other frigates until her town below was swallowed up, consumed in an unidentifiable fleck of island adrift like a speck of dust in a vast turquoise seascape" (104). Later, when the elderly Mala is finally able to protect her vulnerable child self, she also envisions Pohpoh escaping the terrible pain caused by her father's abuse and her mother's abandonment. As the police prepare to arrest her for the murder of her father, she urges the imaginary child beside her, "Yes Pohpoh, you take off and fly, child, fly!" (200). Through the assistance of Tyler's and Mala's imaginations, her childhood longing is finally fulfilled: "Pohpoh bent her body forward, and, as though doing a breast stroke, began to part the air with her arms. . . . She practised making perfect, broad circles, like a frigate bird splayed out against the sky in an elegant V. Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea " (200–201). The image powerfully suggests the way in which Mala herself, through Tyler's assistance, begins to free her spirit from the blind and tyrannical repetition of past trauma, an emancipation that is more fully realized in the conclusion of the frame story. Watching the old woman sitting on the bench and sharing the company of her childhood lover, Ambrose Mohanty, Tyler

sees her suddenly point toward "a distant flight pattern that she alone could see. She laughed as her eyes followed what her fingers described, and waved to whatever it was she saw. . . . In a tiny whispering voice, she uttered her first public words: 'Poh, Pohpohpoh, Poh, Poh, Poh'" (269). As Mala follows the imaginary progress of her child self—and her liberated spirit—now flying free across the sky, Mootoo suggests that the elderly woman is about to embark on a future that will not be predetermined by her father's degrading brutality but will instead be expressed through her own capacity to love and imagine; she enters the "grace of a future," as Irigaray puts it, "that none can control" (120).

In Tyler's actions and in his imaginative re-creation of Mala's history, Mootoo reveals the redemptive power of his gift of love and compassion and explores the acts of grace that may redeem human cruelty. While she emphasizes the selflessness in Tyler's initial response to the elderly woman, she ultimately draws out the mutuality of the relationship between Tyler and Mala—a reciprocity that recognizes and draws on the resilient generosity of Mala's spirit. They respond to each other as "two active subjects [who] may exchange, may alternate in expressing and receiving, cocreating a mutuality that allows for and presumes separateness" (Benjamin 29). Thus, if Tyler's inner narrative helps reinterpret her life in order to show the value that had lain, unregarded, beneath decades of madness, then his outer narrative reveals the ways in which Mala's story has dramatically changed his perspective on himself. Both inner and outer narratives ultimately function as cocreated products that are neither entirely Mala's nor Tyler's; instead they re-create the dynamics of Mala and Tyler's exchange, what Jessica Benjamin, in her study of intersubjectivity, terms the potential space or "third term" created by human interaction, a "dance that is distinct from the dancers yet cocreated by them" (28). They reveal the courage that had enabled Mala to speak her story and the love and compassion with which Tyler listens and retells it; and just as Tyler's narrative of her life is a gift that gives back to her an image of self transformed by his love for her, so, too, Mala's bravery and generosity help give rise to Tyler's new acceptance of himself.¹⁷

While offering hope in its depiction of Mala's recovery of the ability to love and imagine and in its redemption of interpersonal relationships, Mootoo's novel never becomes what historian and trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra dismisses as a "facile narrative of redemption," through which "one derives from the suffering of others something

career-enhancing, ‘spiritually’ uplifting, or identity-forming for oneself or one’s group” (98–99).¹⁸ Instead, Mootoo carefully reflects upon her role and the role of her readers in understanding, representing, and responding to another’s trauma, and she creates, in Tyler, a complex figure whose position within the novel combines that of audience and writer. In establishing the space that enables Mala to speak, and then in listening to her story, Tyler delineates the ways in which readers may respond to the helplessness of another while respecting her difference from themselves and avoiding assimilating the victim’s identity into the self. His actions suggest that the self is most fully challenged (or realized) when responding to her responsibility for the other, and he encourages readers to undertake the “adventure in subjectivity” (Levinas, “Useless Suffering” 99) that begins with the refusal to be indifferent to the vulnerability and need of the other. But as the historian who recovers, pieces together, and retells Mala’s story, Tyler enters into a two-way and dynamic exchange with both Mala and the readers, one in which the encounter with the other is based not on a sense of the other’s absolute difference from self but rather on a recognition of both difference and similarity.

Thus, as the historian who recovers and then narrates Mala’s past, Tyler adopts storytelling methods that attempt the “empathic unsettlement” described by historian LaCapra. In his discussion of the ethical way to write trauma, LaCapra argues that both historian and reader, in serving as witnesses to the trauma of the past, need to maintain a balance between empathy and distance. It is legitimate, he contends, to engage readers’ empathy, because the emotional connection encourages action and compassion, and he acknowledges that no engagement with another can be entirely objective. However, readers and historian must remain sufficiently detached so that they do not absorb the other’s identity into their own or appropriate her or his traumatic experiences for their own self-serving ends. Similarly, Tyler’s narrative encourages an identification with Mala, while also insisting that both he and the readers recognize their difference and avoid a too-easy appropriation of the victim’s position—a position to which they are not entitled and which encourages an identification with the sufferer’s powerlessness that precludes the possibility of action.¹⁹

Mootoo thus underscores that Tyler, for all his compassion, might unintentionally use Mala’s experience to try to win sympathy for himself, and she has him consciously guard against such an appropriation. She also explores the potential dangers in his imaginative capacity to

feel Mala's suffering, fear, and anguish as his own. On the one hand, his imagination compels him, almost against his will, to respond to her unspoken cry for assistance. "She was beginning to perturb me," he notes as he reflects upon the sleeping woman, "not because I feared her but rather because I felt an empathy for her clenched fists, defiant stare, pursed lips, and deep, slow, calculated breathing—an empathy that words alone cannot describe" (21). Yet on the other hand, he at once recognizes the dangers of an unquestioned identification with someone who is too powerless and frail to speak for herself: she risks becoming nothing more than the screen onto which Tyler can project his own feelings of being unfairly excluded by the people of Paradise, an objectification that would repeat the soul murder of Mala's father. Thus, he immediately qualifies his statement, reflecting, "On the other hand, perhaps my intuition was nothing more than recalcitrant yearning, for I did fancy that she and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world" (21).

In Tyler's early reflections, Mootoo particularly foregrounds the ease with which an attempt to help the vulnerable can slide into a self-aggrandizing heroics that uses another's suffering in order to gratify one's own feelings of omnipotence. After his first efforts to alleviate the old woman's terrified agony, Tyler is momentarily filled with an elated self-congratulation. He tells us, "My brain was giddy, joyous with constant recitation of the events with Miss Ramchandin. While they played in my head, I imagined further successes, immeasurable feats that I might accomplish with my great understanding and magnanimity." But he quickly mocks his own vanity, observing with a humorous self-deprecation that "finally, nausea at my own ballooning sense of self wore me down and I slept." Mootoo also moves him to further self-questioning when he is called back to help the old woman later in the night. Hearing her "mournful wailing[,]. . . an eerie and agonizing din" (18) that disturbs all the residents in the home, he enters her bungalow and finds her soaked in her own urine. Engulfed by the thick stench of her fear, he recognizes that he is not as all-powerful as his "ballooning" conceit had temporarily led him to believe; he begins to understand that while he can relate to her pain, its paralyzing, all-consuming intensity belongs to Mala alone and can never be fully grasped by another. Nor can it be contained within a glib narrative in which she suffers in order to provide him with an opportunity for heroic compassion and "further successes [and] immeasurable feats." Instead he recognizes the senselessness of her pain, a recognition that

replaces elation with a shaken awareness of his own vulnerability and limitations. These reflections reveal Tyler's struggles to negotiate a middle road between two opposing responses to Mala: too close an identification on the one hand and despair at the incomprehensibility of her suffering on the other. He tries to balance between these responses—both to be able to assist her through his empathy and yet to remain aware of his own difference from her and to respect her suffering as uniquely her own.

Tyler also adopts a narrative style that both LaCapra and Laurie Vickroy particularly link to narratives of trauma; he attempts to re-create and then place readers within the fragmented interior of Mala's mind, so that they share her pain-filled inner reality and her sense of being frozen in the violent reenactment of her past.²⁰ The disorientation and confusion he seeks to re-create in readers is particularly aided through his seamless transitions between Mala's immediate and distant past, showing the way in which she slides helplessly between past memories and present experience, often unable to distinguish between or separate the two. Similarly, he blurs the line between her outer and inner reality, so that readers experience the destabilizing effect of being menaced by inner delusions so vivid that her dead father, because of his continuing presence in her mind, can continue to terrify her decades later. Trapped in this claustrophobic world, which slips dizzily between memory and fantasy, past and present, delusion and reality, readers begin partially to experience Mala's suffocating confinement within her abusive past.

In conveying Mala's terrible paralysis in the face of both her actual abuse and her memories of her past, Tyler thus subjects readers to what LaCapra terms a "secondary trauma" or unsettlement.²¹ In particular, he captures the terrible feeling of inevitability that accompanies the reenactments of her experience, the way in which Mala awaits the return of her memories with a paralyzing sense of dread and helplessness that replicates the emotions that had accompanied the original trauma. Each year, he narrates, as the rainy season approaches, Mala begins to prepare her hot pepper sauce, getting ready to ward off the agony of abandonment and to deal with the moment in which her past literally becomes her physical reality in the present. As she waits, the tension becomes increasingly unbearable. She feels overwhelmed by the "suffocating pervasiveness of stagnant water" and notes with dread that "the elements seemed to pull together in perfect imitation of another moment, long ago, just after a heavy rainfall." Finally, her

terror dissolves the boundaries between her inner reality and outer environment and the barriers between past and present. The external world begins to resonate with her despairing anguish, and she hears again the fateful words that Asha had spoken repeated in "the noise of insects screaming, '*Pohpoh, Pohpoh, I want Pohpoh*'" (141). Increasingly panicked, she can do nothing but let the memory continue to manifest itself through her and relive the moment when her younger sister had leapt from the safety of the carriage and returned to Mala and their enraged father Ramchandin. When the sun reaches a particular height, the intrusion of the past becomes most intense and unbearable: "She opened her eyes just in time to see the jagged piece of galvanized iron ignite like a brilliant sparkler. The cacophony in her head resounded. Insects shrieked. *Mammy. Asha. Pohpoh. Lavinia*. The rumbling of a buggy" (142). At this moment, she is possessed by her past, and all the pain that she had earlier denied rises up inside her, becoming so intense that it seems to fill even her external world, leaving her unable to separate herself from the physical reenactment of her memories.

Tyler continues to unsettle his audience in his description of Ramchandin's last, most terrible assault on Mala. Not only does he graphically detail the way in which Ramchandin alternately rapes, beats, and sodomizes his daughter but, more disturbingly, he again telescopes past into present, suggesting how the abuse is a terrible recurring cycle from which Mala cannot escape. In this last assault, Ramchandin "threw her on the mattress of his sagging bed and ripped her dress off. She shut her eyes and cried out loudly. It was the first time since that very first time when she was a child that she had felt so much pain" (241). Mala's inward paralysis in the face of her memories, Tyler's narrative indicates, is mercilessly paralleled and reinforced by her outward powerlessness in the face of her environment.

While Tyler's style unsettles readers so that they experience a dislocating "secondary trauma," which makes it impossible to impose a neat pattern on Mala's suffering or give it a meaningful explanation, Mootoo simultaneously insists that they maintain a degree of detachment from Mala's situation so that they do not simply identify and empathize with her. Thus Tyler's narrative maintains a tension between a "critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and [an] affective response to the voices of victims" (LaCapra 109). It creates a sometimes overwhelming sense of Mala's trauma—her confusion, disorientation, and madness; her sense of utter isolation and abandonment; and her engulfing feelings of powerlessness—and subjects

readers to graphic descriptions of sexual assault; yet it also demands a commitment to piecing together Mala's fragmented life. It actively engages readers in working out the connections between the immediate past and the more distant history of Mala's childhood and between Mala's recovered memories and the fantasies of her inner world. At each stage of the novel, they must renew Tyler's commitment to helping patch together Mala's life by struggling to put together the broken pieces that Tyler gives them. They are sufficiently unsettled so that they may recognize their own vulnerability to traumatic experience and abandonment and overcome the smug complacency of the Paradise townspeople, who maintain both a literal and a psychological distance from the knowledge of Mala's suffering. But in staying sufficiently detached rather than giving in to despair or disgust, readers retain the power to act on, reflect on, and take responsibility for helping resolve traumatic repetitions of violence.

Ultimately, in carefully reflecting upon his own role in uncovering Mala's history and striving to engage the reader closely in her or his experiencing of Mala's story, Tyler seeks to create the same dynamic, shared interaction between reader and text that Mootoo so carefully establishes in the relationship between Mala and Tyler and in the interplay between inner and outer narratives. If Tyler not only tells the story but also communicates the story of the telling of the story, as Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert recommend in their study of ethical recountings of trauma, he encourages a similar engagement from the reader. That is, he pushes them to be open to a dynamic exchange with Mala's history, reflecting and acting upon its effects on them. Thus Tyler openly addresses his readers, urging them to aid Mala in discovering her lost sister: "*By setting this story down, I, Tyler, . . . am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people. It is my ardent hope that Asha Ramchandin, at one time a resident in the town of Paradise, Lantanacamara, will chance upon this book, wherever she may be today, and recognize herself and her family. If you are not Asha Ramchandin . . . but know her or someone you suspect might be her or even related to her, please present this and ask that she read it*" (3). While his carefully crafted plea is obviously a rhetorical fiction, it also invites readers to look at the people around them with different eyes, to respond to them with sympathy and compassion, rather than indifference.

Tyler's appeal that readers be open to those who appear most different from them and most vulnerable is particularly reinforced when

he recounts the story of the gardener Hector and his beloved older brother. Like Mala and Asha, the two siblings have been separated from each other since childhood, for the older boy had been forced to leave their village because of their father's intolerance of his homosexuality. Tyler parallels this tale of disappearance and loss, which Hector still mourns, with the two little girls' childhood experiences in which they are not only assaulted by their father but also shunned by the townspeople and bullied by their children. These characters—Hector, his homosexual brother, and the two little girls—are separated from themselves or from those who love them because of others' unwillingness to show tolerance, compassion, or acceptance. If they do manage to survive, it is only by disowning the most valued part of themselves or relinquishing those with whom they are most intimate: Asha must turn her back on the sister who had cared for her as a mother, Mala must suppress the vulnerable part of herself that craves protection and recognition from others, and Hector's brother leaves behind the sibling and the mother who had both loved him. Reflecting upon the depth of these losses, Tyler mourns the destruction of all that is most precious to the human self, the intimate ties of trust and codependence that bind people together into meaningful relationships but are discarded or denied in order to survive: "Today Asha, watching your sister sit in her one-room bungalow stroking a cat she calls 'Pohpoh' sometimes and 'Asha' other times, I do feel despair. I wonder at how many of us, feeling unsafe and unprotected, either end up running far away from everything we know and love, or staying and simply going mad. I have decided today that neither option is more or less noble than the other. They are merely simply different ways of coping, and we each must cope as best as we can" (96–97).

Tyler then ends the novel ambivalently, poised between hopefulness and despair. Mala's rediscovery of the ability to give and receive love is symbolized by the restoration of Asha's long-lost letters. Filled with concern for the sister whom she had left behind, Asha's voice appears to speak directly from the past, confirming the enduring strength and truth of the love they had shared. But despite Mala's joy, the novel ends where it had begun, by invoking Asha's absence and denying the readers closure. After telling the story, which is meant to help reunite the two siblings, Tyler concludes his plea for both Asha's and the reader's assistance by reflecting upon Mala's longing to be restored to her sister and all that she represents: "Not a day passes that you [Asha] are not foremost in our minds. We await a letter, and better yet, your

arrival. She expects you any day soon. You are, to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night” (270). Asha’s continuing absence symbolizes all that Mala has lost in her life and which cannot be redeemed by human action: trust, innocence, and security in her childhood; companionship and love as an adult. But the promise of her return betokens the as yet unknown potential Mala still has to fulfill the last years of her life and to explore a future that will no longer be predetermined by her past.

In these words, which echo back to his opening plea for his readers’ assistance, Tyler implies that the ultimate conclusion of Mala’s story will be determined by the readers and their willingness to be open to, rather than distant from, the suffering of others. Readers, Mootoo indicates, are not meant to be the passive recipients of Mala’s tale, to engage in an easy identification with her in which her paralysis and helplessness are used to entertain, or to justify their own despair. Neither are they meant to use her experiences to support a loss of faith in the power of love and goodness. Instead, her narrator Tyler places readers in a creative and open-ended exchange with the novel, challenging them to work within the potential space created by their imaginative and empathic response to the text and so to arrive at a new understanding of those different from themselves. If they listen to her story with compassion, share it with others, and act upon the demands it places on them, they increase the likelihood of the lost finding their way home and feeling accepted within human society. Thus Mootoo ultimately places the tantalizing promise of Asha’s return within the readers’ willingness to follow Mala’s and Tyler’s acts of imagination, generosity, and love.

Notes

1. See, for example, Casteel, Hoving, Howells, and May.
2. Even May, who focuses on the way the novel “highlights the violence at the heart of both sexual politics and colonization through the story of Mala Ramchandin” (97), examines Mala primarily as an example and symbol of the consequences of colonialism. She does not consider Mala’s experiencing of the incestuous abuse or Mootoo’s representation of traumatic experience in any detail.
3. In her 1998 interview with the *Ottawa Citizen*’s Paul Gessel, for example, Mootoo discussed her attempts, as a five-year-old, to tell her grandmother of her family friends’ sexual abuse. Her grandmother, however, told her not to speak of it again, and it was only when she was in her thirties and began writing that she was able to put her feelings into words.

4. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra develops the concept of what he terms "empathic unsettlement," a means of writing about or responding to another's trauma with a combination of affect and critical distance. Such a balance, he contends, allows a "responsive[ness] to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, . . . [without appropriating] their experience" (41), becoming overwhelmed by their pain, or co-opting their suffering.

5. Literary analyses that focus on the resolution provided by narrating traumatic experience include Suzette A. Henke's study of women's life writing, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*, and Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Approaches such as Henke's and Vickroy's draw heavily on the work of feminist and psychologist Judith Herman, particularly her *Trauma and Recovery*. Psychoanalytic approaches that look at the importance of narrative in helping individuals and societies deal with traumatic experience include Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*; Evelyn Pye's "Memory and Imagination: Placing Imagination in the Therapy of Individuals with Incest Memories"; and the collection of essays edited by Richard Gartner, *Memories of Sexual Betrayal: Truth, Fantasy, Repression, and Dissociation*.

6. The best-known and most influential proponent of this perspective is Cathy Caruth, whose work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* argues that trauma is largely incomprehensible and impossible to conceptualize or represent. Caruth's emphasis on humanity's death drive and the entirely unexpected nature of the traumatic experience draws heavily from Freud and downplays the importance of the interpersonal element both in causing and resolving trauma. While Caruth's approach is echoed in such works as Petar Ramadanovic's *Forgetting Futures: On Memory, Trauma, and Identity* and actively championed by Felman, it has also been sharply criticized by scholars such as Ruth Leys.

7. See, for example, the approaches adopted by Michael S. Roth in *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History*; Robert I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg, and Claudia Eppert, the editors of *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*; and LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

8. In what is now considered a seminal essay on childhood sexual trauma, "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and Children," Sándor Ferenczi, a close colleague and friend of Freud, first explored the way in which children's dependency on their parents brings them to "identify themselves with their aggressor" (162) and to deny or dissociate a whole body of painful experience that does not accord with their abusers' perspective. While Ferenczi's theory was rejected by Freud when it was first presented in 1933, his idea of the child's identification with the aggressor has since become standard in relational and interpersonal psychologists' theories of childhood abuse. See, for example, Bokanowski, Davies, Herman, and Price.

Ferenczi also emphasized in his *Clinical Diary* that an essential aspect of the devastation of childhood trauma lies in the child's sense of abandonment and her or his loss of trust in the benignity and nurturing qualities of the environment. His initial insights have been further developed by scholars of the last fifteen years, perhaps most notably in Judith Herman's well-known *Trauma and Recovery*.

9. The work of Ferenczi, especially his research into childhood trauma and his exploration of transference and countertransference, has attracted increased attention in the last ten years. For Peter Rudnytsky, Ferenczi “incarnates an authentic psychoanalytic identity while being free of Freud’s authoritarian impulses” (217). His work, he contends, allows a shift from Freud’s one-person model of psychoanalysis, which focuses on an individual’s intrapsychic processes, to a two-person model, with its emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between therapist and patient and the belief that an understanding of reality is created through a shared interaction with another or others (207). Similarly, Ferenczi scholar André Haynal argues that “Ferenczi laid the foundations for a new conception of analysis, thereby *de facto* becoming the originator of post-Freudian and postmodern psychoanalysis—that of Balint, Winnicott, Bion, Kohut, Thompson, and even Lacan and others” (317).

10. Freud warned Ferenczi against playing “the tender mother role with others” (*Correspondence* 423). Other analysts, however, have given a more sympathetic appraisal of Ferenczi’s attempts at mutual analysis with his patients, arguing that it showed an attempt, albeit flawed, to create a shared mutuality in his relationship with his analysands. See, for example, Aron, Bokanowski, Brenner, Frankel, Haynal, Ragen and Aron, and Rudnytsky.

11. Cf. Patrizia Giampieri-Deutsch’s contrast between Ferenczi and Otto Rank, on the one hand, and Freud, on the other. Similarly, Haynal, in his comparison of Freud and Ferenczi, argues that Ferenczi “shifted the focus of psychoanalysis from reconstruction and intellectual understanding of the past to an interpersonal experience centering on what is repeated and remembered” (327).

12. In his work *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation*, Leonard Shengold first popularized the term “soul murder” to refer to the psychological devastation caused by physical and sexual childhood abuse. For Shengold, soul murder refers to the destruction of children’s capacity to love and trust, to find pleasure and joy in their world, and to lay claim to and interpret their experiences.

13. For an opposing interpretation of the novel, see Howells’s claim that Mala’s “communion with nature” allows her to “divest . . . herself of the limits of individual identity [and so] find . . . release from traumatic memory” (156), or May’s contention that “Mala refuses to have her garden or her person be defined as signifying only violation, pity, or madness. . . . Thus, as a walled space in the center of Paradise, Mala’s garden can be understood to be . . . a . . . subversive method of politicized resistance” (104). While May, in particular, does well to remind readers of Mala’s capacity to survive and endure, and to insist that they recognize her strength, both interpretations ascribe to Mala an agency and choice that she does not possess. By foregrounding ways in which they feel Mala is able to resist both personal and political forms of violation, they disallow the novel’s most disturbing element—its exploration of the complete powerlessness and paralysis, as well as the violation of bodily and psychic integrity, that scholars place at the core of traumatic experience. Mala, like the incest survivors discussed by Nachmani, is left with “no credible text, no witnesses, no capacity to bear witness” (204).

14. Cf. May’s final claim that “Mootoo uses Mala’s philosophy of nature to

further her vision of a radicalized, egalitarian form of love . . . rather than [an understanding of love] as a means of possession, objectification, or domination" (118).

15. In what is considered a standard discussion of the way in which traumatic experience seems to exist outside the passage of time, endlessly repeating itself in an eternal present, Bessel van der Kolk explains that "mental representation of the experience is probably laid down by means of a system that records affective experience but has no capacity for symbolic processing or placement in space and time" ("Body" 48). Because the memories are not localized in "time and space, these [memory] fragments continue to lead an isolated existence . . . timeless and ego-alien" (van der Kolk, "Trauma and Memory" 295).

16. In his explanation of playing, creativity, and potential space in *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott emphasizes the importance of maintaining a separation and yet an interaction between one's inner world and exterior reality—it is by maintaining the tension and interplay between the two that individuals lay claim to their experiences and live creatively, both discovering and interpreting their external reality.

17. For a different interpretation of Tyler, one that downplays his relationship with Mala in order to focus more exclusively on his gender and sexuality, see Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*.

18. LaCapra uses the phrase "facile narrative of redemption" a number of times to underline the dangers of "spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility)" (42). Similar points about the potentially exploitative or totalizing nature of the appropriation of the victim's experience are made in Simon et al.'s *Between Hope and Despair*.

19. In his extended critical analysis of the dangers of an excessive identification with the victim, LaCapra notes that such an identification may be self-serving or exploitative of another's pain; it may lead to an "unqualified objectification, formal analysis, or harmonizing, indeed redemptive narrative through which one derives from the suffering of others something career-enhancing, 'spiritually' uplifting, or identity-forming for oneself or one's group" (98–99).

20. In her study of the literary representation of trauma, Laurie Vickroy provides a detailed picture of the narrative style that she considers characteristic of trauma narratives. She contends that the structure of trauma narratives attempts to mirror the fragmented way the experience is processed in the brain (3–25) and points out that most try to unsettle the reader, rather than allowing an easy empathy or sympathy with the victim (26). Her work echoes the approach of writers such as LaCapra, who similarly suggests that trauma narratives should adopt a particular style, one that eschews easy closures and uses fragmentation and destabilization to avoid "extreme objectification and harmonizing narratives" (103).

21. Adopting a style that subjects readers to a "secondary trauma" (102) aids in empathic unsettlement, contends LaCapra, in that it comes "as close as possible to the experience of traumatized victims without presuming to be identical to it" (106).

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